

# Weird Tales

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HARLAN ELLISON

FALL 1984

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STEPHEN KING

With

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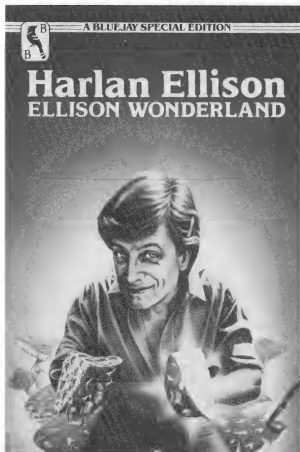
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*While, like a ghastly rapid river,  
Through the pale door,  
A hideous throng rush out forever  
And laugh—but smile no more.*

THE HAUNTED PALACE (1839)  
Edgar Allan Poe

The line which divides amusing comedy from stark horror is a narrow one indeed. In fact so narrow is this line that often we find the most mirthful entertainment hidden within the most grotesque and hideous of circumstances. Take for instance the maniacal bating in a *Punch & Judy* puppet show; the chilling *Grand Gignol Theatre*, or a musty carnival funhouse with faded paintings of vague, horror stricken faces that leaves one wondering whose macabre face and what horror has greeted them.

Amusing laughter can leave one with a strong feeling of warmth and comradeship...Crazed laughter can leave one with just as strong a feeling of cold isolation and pure terror. Much of mankind's fascination with horror seems to be a method of dealing with his inevitable confrontation with the cold unknown, to bring merriment and life to the darkest of situations.

For 48 volumes, and since 1923 *WEIRD TALES* has become recognized as the venerable showplace for fiction of the bizarre, the occult and the unusual. Now with the first issue of volume 49, we are honored to continue the tradition with another collection of premier horror and fantasy fiction. In this issue you'll find the genius of Harlan Ellison with his newest novelette, "Laugh Track", a story which represents Ellison the writer at his very best. Stephen King follows suit with his all new horror piece, "Beachworld"; and we continue with a selection of unusual work by R.A. Lafferty; David Schow, who is familiar to *TWILIGHT ZONE* readers; Arthur Byron Cover and Larry Tritten. Also within this issue are authors who may hardly be called new to *WEIRD TALES*. Ray Bradbury celebrates his return to this magazine with his, "Reunion". Peabody Award winning playwright-author Arch Oboler has prepared a new version of his "Come To The Bank", based on the drama from his *LIGHTS OUT* radio show. Robert Bloch's rare short story "Change of Heart" (appearing long before his original novel, *PSYCHO*) is included as a tribute to his timeless style. New with this issue is the first chapter in the adventure serial, "The Pandora Principle", by Brinke Stevens and fantasy fiction giant, A.E. van Vogt.

*WEIRD TALES* is pleased to have on staff for the *Weirdisms* column, Steven Ward recently retired from U.S. Naval Intelligence; Steve has been researching unexplained phenomena for many years and under many agencies. He is joined by Dow Jones Editor Michael Chaudhuri. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Forrest J. Ackerman, for without his generosity and expertise this magazine would not exist; and to Gil Lamont for his relentless pursuit of perfection. We at *WEIRD TALES* hope you'll enjoy every page of this magazine, and those of future issues. Whether your pleasure be from merriment or the macabre, your suggestions, comments and observations are always welcome for future letter columns.

—The Publisher



# Weird Tales

Volume 49, Number 1  
Fall Issue, 1984

Cover By H. Ro Kim  
*The Pandora Principle*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### LONG NOVELETTE

LAUGH TRACK .....	Harlan Ellison	6
-------------------	----------------	---

### SHORT STORIES

BEACHWORLD .....	Stephen King	16
SPEAK .....	Henry Slesar	25
VISITATION .....	David Schow	26
CHANGE OF HEART .....	Robert Bloch	34
THE NINETY-NINTH CUBICLE .....	R. A. Lafferty	38
COME TO THE BANK .....	Arch Oboler	43
MAMMA'S BOY .....	Arthur Byron Cover	48
REUNION .....	Ray Bradbury	56
FLECKS OF GOLD .....	Larry Tritten	60
THE PANDORA PRINCIPLE .....	Brinke Stevens A.E. van Vogt	64

### DEPARTMENTS

WEIRDISMS .....		41
BOOK REVIEWS .....	Michael P. Hodel	71



# THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

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# LAUGH TRACK

By

Harlan Ellison

I loved my Aunt Babe for three reasons. The first was that even though I was only ten or eleven, she flirted with me as she did with any male of any age who was lucky enough to pass through the heat of her line-of-sight. The second was her breasts—I knew them as “titties”—which left your arteries looking like the Holland Tunnel at rush hour. And the third was her laugh. Never before and never since, in the history of this planet, including every species of life-form extant or extinct, has there been a sound as joyous as my Aunt Babe’s laugh which I, as a child, imagined as the sound of the Toonerville Trolley clattering downhill. If you have never seen a panel of that long-gone comic strip, and have no idea what the Toonerville Trolley looked like, forget it. It was some terrific heluva laugh. It could pucker your lips.

My Aunt Babe died of falling asleep and not waking up in 1955, when I was twelve years old.

I first recognized her laugh while watching a segment of *Leave It to Beaver* in November of 1957. It was on the laugh track they’d dubbed in after the show had been shot, but I was only fourteen and thought those were real people laughing at Jerry Mathers’s predicament. I yelled for my mother to come quickly, and she came running from the kitchen, her hands all covered with wax from putting up the preserves, and she thought I’d hurt myself or something.

“No . . . no, I’m okay . . . listen!”

She stood there, listening. “Listen to what?” she said after a minute.

“Wait . . . wait . . . there! You hear that? It’s Aunt Babe. She isn’t dead, she’s at that show.”

My mother looked at me just the way your mother would look at you if you said something like that, and she shook her head, and she said something in Italian my grandmother had no doubt said while shaking her head at her, long ago; and she went back to imprisoning boysenberries. I sat there and watched The Beav and Eddie Haskell and Whitey Whitney, and broke up every time my Aunt Babe laughed at their antics.

I heard my Aunt Babe’s laugh on *The Real McCoys* in 1958; on *Hennessey* and *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* in 1959; on *The Andy Griffith Show* in 1960; on *Car 54, Where Are You?* in 1962; and in the years that followed I laughed along with her at *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Lucy Show*, *My Favorite Martian*, *The Addams Family*, *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Get Smart*!

In 1970 I heard my Aunt Babe laughing at *Green Acres*, which—though I always liked Eddie Albert and Alvy Moore—I thought was seriously lame; and it bothered me that her taste had deteriorated so drastically. Also, her laugh seemed a little thin. Not as ebulliently Toonerville Trolley going downhill any more.

By 1972 I knew something was wrong because Aunt Babe was convulsing over *Me and the Chimp* but not a sound from her for *My World . . . And Welcome To It*.

By 1972 I was almost thirty. I was working in television, and because I had lived with the sound of my Aunt Babe’s laughter for so long, I never thought there was anything odd about it, and I never again mentioned it to anyone.

Then, one night, sitting with a frozen pizza and a Dr. Brown’s cream soda, watching an episode of the series I was writing, a sitcom you may remember called *Misty Malone*, I heard my Aunt Babe laughing at a lone that the story editor had not understood and rewritten. At that moment, bang! comes the light bulb burning in my brain, comes the epiphany, comes the rude awakening, and I hear myself say, “This is crazy. Babe’s been dead and buried to these seventeen years, and there is strictly *no way* she can be laughing at this moron line that Bill Tidy rewrote from my golden prose, and this is weirder than shit, and *what the hell is going on here!*?”

Besides which, Babe’s laugh was now sounding a lot like a 1971 Pinto without chains trying to rev it itself out of a snowy rut into which cinders had been shoveled.

And I suppose for the first time I understood that Babe was not alive at the taping of all those shows over the years, but was merely on an old laugh track. At which point I remembered the afternoon in 1953 when she’d taken me to the Hollywood Ranch Market to go shopping, and one of those guys had been standing there handing out tickets to the filming of tv shows, and Babe had taken two tickets to *Our Miss Brooks*, and she’d gone with some passing fancy she was dating at the time, and told us later that she thought Eve Arden was funnier than Lucille Ball.

The laugh track from that 1953 show was obviously still in circulation. Had been, in fact, in circulation for twenty years. And for twenty years my Aunt Babe had been forced to laugh at the same old weary sitcom minutiae, over and over and over. She’d had to laugh at the salt instead of the sugar in Fred Mac-



Overton Lord

Murray's coffee; at Granny Clampett sending Buddy Ebsen out to shoot a possum in Beverly Hills; at Bob Cummings trying to conceal Julie Newmar's robot identity; at The Fonz almost running a comb through his pompadour; at all the mistaken identities, all the improbable last-minute saves of hopeless situations, all the sophomoric pratfalls from Gilligan to Gidget. And I felt just terrible for her.

Native Americans, what we used to be allowed to call Indians when I was a kid, have a belief that if someone takes their picture with a camera, the box captures their soul. So they shy away from photographers. Amerinds seldom become bank robbers: there are cameras in banks. There was no graduation picture of Cochise in his high school yearbook.

What if—I said to myself—sitting there with that awful pizza growing cold on my lap—what if my lovely Aunt Babe, who had been a Ziegfeld Girl, and who had loved my Uncle Morrie, and who had had such wonderful titles and never let on that she knew exactly what I was doing when I'd fall asleep in the car on the way home and snuggle up against them, *what if my dear Aunt Babe's soul, like her laugh, had been trapped on that goddam track?*

And what if she was in there, in there forever, doomed to laugh endlessly at imbecilic shit rewritten by ex-hairdressers, instead of roaming around Heaven, flirting with the angels, which I was certain should have been her proper fate, being that she was such a swell person? What if?

It was the sort of thinking that made my head hurt a lot.

And it made me feel even lower, the more I thought about it, because I didn't know what I could do about it. I just knew that that was what had happened to my Aunt Babe; and there she was in there, condemned to the stupidest hell imaginable. In some arcane way, she had been doomed to an eternity of electronic restimulation. In speech therapy they have a name for it: cataphasia: verbal repetition. But I could tell from the frequency with which I was now hearing Babe, and from the indiscriminate use to which her laugh was being put—not just on *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Maude*, but on yawners like *The Sandy Duncan Show* and a midseason replacement with Larry Hagman called *Here We Go Again*, which didn't—and the way her laugh was starting to slur like an ice skating elephant, that she wasn't having much fun in there. I began to believe that she was like some sort of beanfield slave, every now and then being goosed electronically to laugh. She was a video galley slave, one of the pod people, a member of some ghastly high-frequency chain gang. Cataphasia, but worse. Oh, how I wanted to save her; to drag her out of there and let her tormented soul bound free like a snow rabbit, to vanish into great white spaces where the words *Laverne* and *Shirley* had never trembled in the lambent mist.

Then I went to bed and didn't think about it again until 1978.

By September of 1978 I was working for Bill Tidy again. In years to come I would refer to that pox-ridden period as the Season I Stepped In a Pile of Tidy.

Each of us has one dark eminence in his or her life who somehow has the hoodoo sign on us. Persons so cosmically loathesome that we continually spend our time when in their company silently asking ourselves *What the hell, what the bloody hell, what the everlasting Technicolor hell am I doing sitting here with this ambulatory piece of offal? This is the worst person who ever got born, and someone ought to wash out his life with a bar of Fels-Naptha.*

But there you sit, and the next time you blink, there you sit again. It was probably the way Catherine the Great felt on her dates with Rasputin.

Bill Tidy had that hold over me.

In 1973 when I'd been just a struggling sitcom writer, getting his first breaks on *Misty Malone*, Tidy had been the story editor. An authoritarian Fascist with all the creative insight of a sump pump. But now, a mere five years later, things were a great deal different: I had created a series, which meant I was a struggling sitcom writer with my name on a parking slot at the studio; and Bill Tidy, direct lineal descendant of The Blob that tried to eat Steve McQueen, had swallowed up half the television industry. He was now the heavy-breathing half of Tidy-Spellberg Productions, in partnership with another ex-hairdresser named Harvey Spellberg, whom he'd met during a metaphysical retreat to Reno, Nevada. They'd become corporate soul-mates while praying over the crap tables and in just a few years had built upon their unerring sense of how much debasement the American television-viewing audience could sustain (a much higher gag-reflex level than even the experts had postulated, thereby paving the way for *Three's Company*), to merge as "prime suppliers" of gibbering lunacy for the three networks.

Bill Tidy was to Art as Pekin, North Dakota is to wild nightlife.

But he was the fastest money in town when it came to marketing a series idea to one of the networks, and my agent had sent over the prospectus for *Ain't It the Truth*, without my knowing it; and before I had a chance to scream, "Nay, nay, my liege! There are some things mere humans were never meant to know, Doctor Von Frankenstein!" the network had made a development deal with the Rupert Murdoch of mindlessness, and of a sudden I was—as they so aptly put it—in bed with Bill Tidy again.

By September, I was a raving lunatic. I spent much of my time dreaming about biting the heads off chickens. The deranged wind of network babble and foaming Tidyism blew through the haunted cathedral of my brain. What little originality and invention I'd brought to the series concept—and at best what we're talking about here is primetime network situation comedy, not a PBS tour conducted by Alis-tair Cooke through the Library of Alexandria—was



steadily and firmly leached out of the production by Bill Tidy. Any time a line or a situation with some charm or esthetic value dared to peek its head out of the *merde* of the scripts, Tidy as Grim Reaper would lurch onto the scene swinging the scythe of his demented bad taste, and intellectual decapitation instantly followed.

I developed a hiatic hernia, I couldn't hold down solid food and took to subsisting on strained mung from Gerber's inexhaustible and vomitous larder, I snapped at everyone, sex was a concept whose time had come and gone for me, and I saw my gentle little offering to the Gods of Comedy turned into something best suited for a life under mossy stones.

Had I known that on the evening of Thursday, September 14th, 1978 *Ain't It the Truth* was to premiere opposite a new ABC show called *Mork and Mindy*, and that within three weeks a dervish named Robin Williams would be dining on Nielsen rating shares the way sharks devour entire continents, I might have been able to hold onto enough of my sanity to weather the Dark Ages. And I wouldn't have gotten involved with Wally Modisett, the phantom sweetener, and I wouldn't have spoken into the black box, and I wouldn't have found the salvation for my dead Aunt Babe's soul.

By early in September Williams had not yet uttered his first *Nanoo-nanoo* (except on a spinoff segment of *Happy Days* and who the hell watched *that*?) and we had taped the first three segments of *Ain't It the Truth* before a live audience at the Burbank Studios, if you can call those who voluntarily go to tapings of sitcoms as "living," and late one night the specter of Bill Tidy appeared in the doorway of my office, his great horse face looming down at me like the demon that emerges from the *Night on Bald Mountain* section of Disney's *Fantasia*; and his sulphurous breath reached across the room and made all the little hairs in my nostrils curl up and try to pull themselves out so they could run away and hide in the back of my head somewhere; and the two reflective puddles of Vegemite he called eyes smoldered at me, and this is what he said. First he said:

"That fuckin' fag cheese-eater director's never gonna work again. He's gonna go two days over, mark my words. I'll see the putzola never works again."

Then he said:

"I bought another condo in Phoenix. Solid gold investment. Better than Picassos."

Then he said:

"I heard it at lunch today. A cunt is just a clam that's wearin' a fright-wig. Good, huh?"

Then he said:

"I want you to stay late tonight. I can't trust anyone else. Guy'll show up here about eight. He'll find you. Just stay put till he gets here. Never mind a name. He'll make himself known to you. Take him over to the mixing studio, run the first three shows for him. Nobody else gets in, *kapeesh*, *paisan*?"

I was having such a time keeping my gorge from becoming buoyant that I barely heard his directive. Bill Tidy gave new meaning to the words King of the Pig People. The only groups he had failed to insult in the space of thirteen seconds were blacks, Orientals, paraplegics and Doukhobors, and if I didn't quickly agree to his demands, he'd no doubt round on them, as well. "Got it, Bill. Yessiree, you can count on me. Uh-huh, absolutely, right-on, dead-center, I hear ya talkin', I'm your boy, I loves workin' foah ya Massa' Tidy-suh, you can bank on me!"

He gave me a look. "You know, Angelo, you are gettin' stranger and stranger, like some kind of weird insect."

And he turned and he vanished, leaving me all alone there in the encroaching darkness, just tuning my antennae and rubbing my hind legs together.

I was slumped down on my spine, eyes closed, in the darkened office with just the desk lamp doing its best to rage against the dying of the light, when I heard someone whisper huskily, "Turn off the light."

I opened my eyes. The room was empty. I looked out the window behind my desk. It was night. I was three flights up in the production building. No one was there.

"The light. Turn off the light, can you hear what I'm telling you?"

I strained forward toward the open door and the dark hallway beyond. "You talking to me?" Nothing moved out there.

"The light. Slow; you're a very slow person."

Being Catholic, I respond like a Pavlovian dog to guilt. I turned out the light.

From the deeper darkness of the hallway I saw something shadowy detach itself and glide into my office. "Can I keep my eyes open," I said, "or would a blindfold serve to palliate this unseemly paranoia of yours?"

The shadowy form snorted disdainfully. "At these prices you can use words even bigger than that and I don't give a snap." I heard fingers snap. "You care to take me over to the mixing booth?"

I stood up. Then I sat down. "Don't wanna play." I folded my arms.

The shadowy figure got a petulant tone in his voice. "Okay, c'mon now. I've got three shows to do, and I haven't got all night. The world keeps turning. Let's go."

"Not in the cards, Lamont Cranston. I've been ordered around a lot these last few days; and since I don't know you from a stubborn stall, I'm digging in my heels. Remember the Alamo. Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute. The only thing we

have to fear is fear itself. Forty-four forty or fight."

"I think that's fifty-four forty or fight," he said.

We thought about that for a while. Then after a long time I said, "Who the hell are you, and what is it you do that's so illicit and unspeakable that first of all Bill Tidy would hire you to do it, which puts you right on the same level as me, which is a level of graverobbers, dog catchers and horse-dopers; and second, which is so furtive and vile that you have to do it in the dead of night, coming in here wearing garb fit only for a commando raid? Answer in the key of C#."

He chuckled. It was a nice chuckle. "You're okay, kid," he said. And he dropped into the chair on the other side of my desk where writers pitching ideas for stories sat; and he turned on the desk lamp.

"Wally Modisett," he said, extending a black-gloved hand. "Sound editor." I took the hand and we shook. "Free-lance," he said.

That didn't sound so ominous. "Why the Creeping Phantom routine?"

Then he said the word no one in Hollywood says. He looked intently at all of my face, particularly around the mouth, where lies come from, and he said: "Sweetening."

If I'd had a silver crucifix, I'd have thrust it at him at arm's length. *Be still my heart*, I thought.

There are many things of which one does not speak in the television industry. One does not repeat the name of the NBC executive who was making women writers give him blowjobs in his office in exchange for writing assignments, even though he's been pensioned off with a lucrative production deal at a major studio and the network paid for his psychiatric counseling for several years. One does not talk about the astonishing Digital Dance done by the royalty numbers in a major production company's ledgers, thereby fleecing several superstar participants out of their "points" in the profits, even though it made a large stink on the *World News Tonight* and everybody scamped around trying to settle out of court while *TV Guide* watched. One does not talk about how the studio frightened a buxom ingenue who had become an overnight national sensation into modifying her demands for triple salary in the second season her series was on the air, not even to hint knowingly of a kitchen chair with nails driven up through the seat from the underside.

And one never, never, no never ever talks about the phantom sweeteners.

*This show was taped before a live studio audience!"*

If you've heard it once, you've heard it at least twice. And so when those audiences break up and fall on the floor and roll around and drum their heels and roar so hard they have to clutch their stomachs and tears of hilarity blind them and their noses swell from crying too much and they sound as if they're all genetically-selected high-profile tickleables, you fall right with them because that ain't canned laughter, it's a live audience, onaccounta *This*

*show was taped before a live studio audience.*

While high in the fly loft of the elegant opera house, the Phantom Sweetener looks down and chuckles smugly.

They're legendary. For years there was only Charlie Douglas, a name never spoken. A laugh man. A sound technician. A sweetener. They say he still uses laughs kidnapped off radio shows from the Forties and Fifties. Golden laughs. Unduplicable originals. Special, rich laughs that blend and support and lift and build a resonance that punches your subliminal buttons. Laughs from *The Jack Benny Show*, from segments of *The Fred Allen Show* down in Allen's Alley, from *The Chase & Sanborn Hour* with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy (one of the shows on which Charlie mixed it up with W.C. Fields). The laughs taht Ed Wynn got, that Goodman and Jane Ace got, that Fanny Brice got. Rich, teak-colored laughs from a time in this country when humor wasn't produced by slugs like Bill Tidy. For a long time Charlie Douglas was all alone as the man who could make even dull thuds go over boffola.

But no one knew how good he was. Except the IRS, which took note of his underground success in the industry by raking in vast amounts of his hard-earned cash.

Using the big Spotmaster cartridges—carts that looked like eight-track cassettes, with thirty cuts per cart—twelve or fourteen per job—Charlie Douglas became a hired gun of guffaws, a highwayman of hee-haws, Zorro of zaniness; a troubleshooter working extended overtime in a specialized craft where he was a secret weapon with a never-spoken codename.

Carrying with him from studio to studio the sounds of great happy moments stolen from radio signals long-since on their way to Proxima Centauri.

And for a long time Charlie Douglas had it all to himself, because it was a closely-guarded secret; not one of the open secrets perhaps unknown in Kankakee or Key West, like Merv Griffin or Ida Lupino or Roger Moore; but common knowledge at the Polo Lounge and Chasen's.

But times got fat and the industry grew and there was more work, and more money, than one Phantom Sweetener could handle.

So the mother of invention called forth more audio soldiers of fortune: Carroll Pratt and Craig Porter and Tom Kafka and two silent but sensational guys from Tokyo and techs at Glen Glenn Sound and Vidtronic. And you never mention their names or the shows they've sweetened, lest you get your buns run out of the industry. It's an open secret, closely-held by the community. The networks deny their existence, the production company executives would let you nail them hands and feet to their office doors before they'd cop to having their shows shot before a live studio audience sweetened. In the dead of night by the phantoms.

Of whom Wally Modisett is the most mysterious.

And here I sat, across from him. He wore a black turtleneck sweater, jeans and gloves. And he placed on the desk the legendary black box. I looked at it. He chuckled.

"That's it," he said.

"I'll be damned," I said.

I felt as if I were in church.

In sound editing, the key is equalization. Bass, treble, they can isolate a single laugh, pull it off the track, make a match even twenty years later. They put them on "endless loops" and then lay the show over to a multi-track audio machine, and feed in one laugh on a separate track, meld it, blend it in, punch it up, put that special button-punch giggle right in there with the live studio audience track. They do it, they've always done it, and soon now they'll be able to do it with digital encoding. And he sat right there in front of me with the legendary black box. Legendary, because Wally Modiset was an audio genius, an electronics Machiavelli who had built himself a secret system to do it all through that little black box that he took to the studios in the dead of night when everyone was gone, right into the booth at the mixing room, and he didn't need a multi-track.

If it weren't something to be denied to the grave, the *mensches* and moguls of the television industry would have Wally Modiset's head right up there on Mt. Rushmore in the empty space between Teddy Roosevelt and Abe Lincoln.

What took twenty-two tracks for a combined laying on a huge machine, Wally Modiset carried around in the palm of his hand. And looking at his long, sensitive face, with the dark circles under his eyes, I guess I saw a foreshadowing of great things to come. There was laughter in his eyes.

I sat there most of the night, running the segments of *Ain't It the Truth*. I sat down below in the screening room while the Phantom Sweetener locked himself up in the booth. No one, he made it clear, watched him work his magic.

And the segments played, with the live audience track, and he used his endless loops from his carts—labeled "Single Giggle 1" and "Single Giggle 2" and slightly larger "Single Giggle 3" and the dreaded "Titter/Chuckle" and the ever-popular "Rim Shot"—those loops of his own design, smaller than those made by Spotmaster, and he built and blended and sweetened the hell out of that laugh track till even I chuckled at moronic material Bill Tidy had bastardized to a level that only the Jukes and Kallikaks could have found uproarious.

And then, on the hundredth playback, after Modiset had added another increment of hilarity, I heard my dead Aunt Babe. I sat straight up in the plush screening room chair, and I slapped the switch

on the console that fed into the booth, and I yelled, "Hey! That last one! That last laugh... what was that...?"

He didn't answer for a moment. Then, tinnily, through the console intercom, he said, "I call it a wonky."

"Where'd it come from?"

Silence.

"C'mon, man, where'd you get that laugh?"

"Why do you want to know?"

I sat there for a second, then I said, "Listen, either you've got to come down here, or let me come up there. I've got to talk to you."

Silence. Then after a moment, "Is there a coffee machine around here somewhere?"

"Yeah, over near the theater."

"I'll be down in about fifteen minutes. We'll have a cup of coffee. Think you can hold out that long?"

"If you nail a duck's foot down, does he walk in circles?"

It took me almost an hour to convince him. Finally, he decided I was almost as bugfuck as he was, and the idea was so crazy it might be fun to try and work it out. I told him I was glad he'd decided to try it because if he hadn't I'd have followed him to his secret lair and found some way to blackmail him into it, and he said, "Yeah, I can see you'd do that. You're not a well person."

"Try working with Bill Tidy sometimes," I said. "It's enough to turn Mother Teresa into a hooker."

"Give me some time," he said. "I'll get back to you."

I didn't hear from him for a year and a half. *Ain't It the Truth* had gone to the boneyard to join *The Chicago Teddy Bears* and *Angie and The Dumplings*. Nobody missed it, not even its creator. Bill Tidy had wielded his scythe with skill.

Then just after two a.m. on a summer night in Los Angeles, my phone rang, and I fumbled the receiver off the cradle and found my face somehow, and a voice said, "I've got it. Come." And he gave me an address; and I went.

The warehouse was large, but all his shit was jammed into one corner. Multi-tracks and oscilloscopes and VCRs and huge 3-mil thick Mylar foam speakers that looked like the rear seats of a 1933 Chevy. And right in the middle of the floor was a larger black box.

"You're kidding?" I said.

He was like a ten-year-old kid. "Would I shit you? I'm telling you, fellah, I've gone where no man has gone before. I has done did it! Jonas Salk and Marie

Curie and Lee De Forest and all the rest of them have got to move over, slide aside, get to the back of the bus." And he leaped around, howling, "*I am the king!*"

When I was able to peel him off the catwalks that made a spiderweb tracery above us, he started making some sense. Not a lot of sense, because I didn't understand half of what he was saying, but enough sense for me to begin to believe that this peculiar obsession of mine might have some toe in the world of reality.

"The way they taped shows back in 1953, when your aunt went to that *Our Mus Brooks*, was they'd use a ¼" machine, reel-to-reel. They'd have directional mikes above the audience, to separate individual laughs. One track for the program, and another track for the audience. They they'd just pick up what they want, equalize, and sock it onto one track for later use. Sweetened as need be."

He went to a portable fridge and pulled out a Dr. Pepper and looked in my direction. I shook my head. I was too excited for junk food. He popped the can, took a swig and came back to me.

"The first thing I had to do was find the original tape, the master. Took me a long time. It was in storage with . . . well, you don't need to know that. It was in storage. I must have gone through a thousand old masters. But I found her. Then I had to pull her out. But not just the *sound* of her laugh. The actual laugh itself. The electronic impulses. I used an early model of this to do it." He waved a hand at the big black box.

"She'd started sounding weak to me, over the years," I said. "Slurred sometimes. Scratchy."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Impatient to get on with the great revelation. "That was because she was being diminished by fifth, sixth, twentieth generation re-recording. No, I got her at full strength, and I did what I call 'deconvolving.'"

"Which is?"

"Never mind."

"You going to say 'never mind' every time I ask what the hell you did to make it work?"

"As Groucho used to say to contestants, 'You bet your ass.'"

I shrugged. It was his fairy tale.

"Once I had her deconvolved, I put her on an endless loop. But not just any kind of normal standard endless loop. You want to know what kind of endless loop I put her on?"

I looked at him. "You going to tell me to piss off?"

"No. Go ahead and ask."

"All right already: I'm asking. What the hell kind of endless loop did you put her on?"

"A moebius loop."

He looked at me as if he'd just announced the birth of a two-headed calf. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. That didn't stop me from whistling through my two front teeth, loud enough to cause echoes in the warehouse and I said, "No shit!?"

He seemed pleased, and went on faster than before. "Now I feed her into the computer, digitally encode her so she never diminishes. Slick, right? Then I feed in a program that says harmonize and synthesize her, get a simulation mapping for the instrument that produced that sound; in other words, your aunt's throat and tongue and palate and teeth and larynx and alla that. Now comes the tricky part. I build a program that postulates an actual physical situation, a terrain, a place where that voice exists. And I send the computer on a search to bring me back everything that comprises that place."

"Hold hold hold it, Lamont. Are you trying to tell me that you went in search of the Land of Oz, using that loop of Babe's voice?"

He nodded about a hundred and sixteen times.

"How'd you do that? I know: piss off. But that's some kind of weird metaphysical shit. It can't be done."

"Not by drones, fellah. But I can do it. I did it." He nodded at the black box.

"The TV sitcom land where my dead Aunt Babe is trapped, it's in there, in that cube?"

"Ah calls it a *similarity matrix*," he said, with an accent that could get him killed in South/Central L.A.

"You can call it rosewater if you like, Modisett, but it sounds like the foothills of Bandini Mountain to me."

His grin was the mutant offspring of a sneer and a smirk. I'd seen that kind of look only once, on the face of a failed academic at a collegiate cocktail party. Later that evening the guy used the smirk play once too often and a little twenty-bird of an English prof gave him high cause to go see a periodontal reconstructionist.

"I can reconstruct her like a clone, right in the machine," he said.

"How do you know? Tried it yet?"

"It's your aunt, not mine," he said. "I told you I'd get back to you. Now I'm back to you, and I'm ready to run the showboat out to the middle of the river."

So he turned on a lot of things on the big board he had, and he moved a lot of slide-switches up the gain slots, and he did this, and he did that, and a musical hum came from the Quad speakers, and he looked over his shoulder at me, across the tangle of wires and cables that disappeared into the black box, and he said, "Wake her up."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Wake her. She's been an electronic code for almost twenty-five years. She's been asleep. She's an amputated frog leg. Send the current through her."

"How?"

"Call her. She'll recognize your voice."

"How? It's been a long time. I don't sound like the kid I was when she died."

"Trust me," he said. "Call her."

I felt like a goddam fool. "Where do I speak?"

"Just speak, asshole. She'll hear you."

So I stood there in the middle of that warehouse and said, "Aunt Babe?" There was nothing.

"A little louder. Gentle, but louder. Don't startle her."

"You're outta your . . ." His look silenced me. I took a deep breath and said, a little louder, "Hey, Aunt Babe? You in there? It's me, Angelo."

I heard something. At first it sounded like a mouse running toward me across a long blackboard, a blackboard maybe a hundred miles long. Then there was something like the wind you hear in thick woods in the autumn. Then the sound of somebody unwrapping Christmas presents. Then the sound of water, like surf, pouring into a cave at the base of a cliff, and then draining out again. Then the sound of a baby crying and the sound suddenly getting very deep as if it were a three hundred pound killer baby that wanted to be fed parts off a freshly-killed dinosaur. This kind of torrential idiocy went on for a while, and then, abruptly, out of nowhere, I heard my Aunt Babe clearing her throat, as if she were getting up in the morning. That phlegmy throat-clearing that sounds like quarts of yogurt being shoveled out of a sink.

"Angelo . . .?"

I crossed myself about eleven times, ran off a few fast Hail Mary's and Our Father's, swallowed hard and said, "Yeah, Aunt Babe, it's me. How are you?"

"Let me, for a moment here, let me get my bearings." It took more than a moment. She was silent for a few minutes, though she did once say "I'll be right with you, *mia cara*."

And finally, I heard her say, "I am really fit to be tied. Do you have any idea what they have put me through? Do you have even the faintest idea how many times they've made me watch *The Partridge Family*? Do you have any idea how much I hate that kind of music? Never Cole Porter, never Sammy Cahn, not even a little Gus Edwards; I'd settle for Sigmund Romberg after those squalling children. *Caro nipote, quanto mi sei mancato!*" Angelo . . . *bella bella*. I want you to tell me everything that's happened, because as soon as I get a chance, I'm going to make a stink you're not going to believe!"

It was Babe. My dearest Aunt Babe. I hadn't heard that wonderful mixture of pungent English and lilting Italian with its show biz Yiddish resonances in almost thirty years. I hadn't spoken any Italian in nearly twenty years. But I heard myself saying to the empty air, "*Come te la sei passata!*" How've you been?

"*Ti voglio bene — bambino caro*. I feel just fine. A bit fuzzy, I've been asleep a while but *come sta la famiglia?* Anche quelli che non posso sopportare."

So I told her all about the family, even the ones she couldn't stand, like Uncle Nuncio with breath like a goat, and Carmine's wife, Gioletta, who'd always called Babe a floozy. And after a while she had me try to explain what had happened to her, and I did the best I could, to which she responded, "*Non mi sento come un fantasma*."

So I told her she didn't feel like a ghost because she *wasn't*, strictly speaking, a ghost. More like a random hoot in the empty night. Well, that didn't go over too terrific, because in an instant she'd grasped the truth that if she wasn't going where it is that dead people go, she'd never meet up with my Uncle Morrie again; and that made her very sad. "*Oh, dio!*" and she started crying.

So I tried to jolly her out of it by talking about all the history that had transpired since 1955, but it turned out she knew most of it anyhow. After all, hadn't she been stuck there, inside the biggest blabbermouth the world had ever known? Even though she'd been in something like an alpha state of almost-sleep, her essence had been saturated with news and special reports, docudramas and public service announcements, talk shows and panel discussions, network extra alerts and hour-by-hour live coverage of fast-breaking events.

Eventually I got around to explaining how I'd gotten in touch with her, about Modisett and the big black box, about how the Phantom Sweetener had deconvolved her, and about Bill Tidy.

She was not unfamiliar with the name.

After all, hadn't she been stuck there, inside the all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing electromagnetic pimp for Tidy's endless supply of brain-damaged, insipid persiflage?

I painted Babe a loving word-portrait of my employer and our unholy liaison. She said: "*Stronzo! Figlio di una mignotta! Cacasotto!*" She also called him *minchiome*, by which I'm sure she meant the word in its meaning of goof, or simpleton, rather than literally: "man with erection."

Modisett, who spoke no Italian, stared wildly at me, seeming to bask in the unalloyed joy of having tapped a line into some Elsewhere. Yet even he could tell from the tone of revulsion in Babe's disembodied voice that she had suffered long under the exquisite tortures of swimming in a sea of Tidy product.

What Tidy had been doing to me seemed to infuriate her. She was still my loving Aunt Babe.

So I spent all that night, and the next day, and the next night — while Modisett mostly slept and emptied Dr. Pepper down his neck — chatting at leisure with my dead Aunt Babe.

You'll never know how angry someone can get from prolonged exposure to Gary Coleman.

The Phantom Sweetener can't explain what followed. He says it defies the rigors of Boolean logic, whatever the hell that means. He says it transcends the parameters of Maxwell's Equations.

tion, which ought to put Maxwell in a bit of a snit. He says (and with more than a touch of the gibber in his voice) it deflowers, rapes & pillages, breaks & enters Minkowski's Covariant Tensor. He says it is enough to start Philo T. Farnsworth spinning so hard in his grave that he would carom off Vladimir K. Zworykin in his. He says it would get Marvin Minsky up at M.I.T. speaking in tongues. He says—and this one *really* turned me around and opened my eyes—he says it (wait for it), “Distorts Riemannian geometry.” To which I said, “You have *got* to be shitting me! Not Riemannian gefuckingometry?!”

This is absolute babble to me, but it's got Modisett down on all fours, foaming at the mouth and sucking at the electrical outlets.

Apparently, Babe has found pathways in the microwave comm-system. The Phantom Sweetener says it might have happened because of what he calls “print-through,” that phenomenon that occurs on audio tape when one layer magnetizes the next layer, so you hear an echo of the word or sound that is next to be spoken. He says if the tape is wound “heads out” and is stored that way, then the signal will jump. The signal that is my dead Aunt Babe has jumped. And keeps jumping. She's loose in the comm-system and she ain't asking where's the beef: *she knows!* And Modisett says the reason they can't catch her and wipe her is that old tape *always* bleeds through. Which is why, when Bill Tidy's big multimillion dollar sitcom aired last year, instead of the audience roaring with laughter, there was the voice of this woman shouting above the din, “That's stupid! Worse than stupid! That's *bore-ing!* Ka-ka! C'mon folks, let's have a good old-fashioned Bronx cheer for crapola like this! Let's show 'em what we *really* think of this flopolala!”

And then, instead of augmented laughter, instead of yoks, came a raspberry that could have floated the Titanic off the bottom.

Well, they pulled the tape, and they tried to find

her, but she was gone, skipping off across the similarity matrix like Bambi, only to turn up the next night on another Tidy—Spellberg abomination.

Well, there was no way to stop it, and the networks got very leery of Tidy and Company, because they couldn't even use the millions of billions of dollars worth of shitty rerun shows they'd paid billions and millions for syndication rights to, and they sued the hell out of Bill Tidy, who went crazy as a soup sandwich not too long ago, and I'm told he's trying to sell ocean view lots in some place like Pekin, North Dakota, and living under the name Silas Marner or somesuch because half the civilized world is trying to find him to sue his ass off.

And I might have a moment of compassion for the creep, but I haven't the time. I have three hit shows running at the moment, one each on ABC, NBC and CBS.

They are big hits because somehow, in a way that no one seems able to figure out, there are all these little subliminal buttons being pushed by my shows, and they just soar to the top of the Nielsen ratings.

And I said to Aunt Babe, “Listen, don't you want to go to Heaven, or wherever it is? I mean, don't you want out of that limbo existence?”

And with love, because she wanted to protect her *bambino caro*, because she wanted to make up for the fact that I didn't have her wonderful bosom to fall asleep on anymore, she said, “Get out of here, Angelo, my darling? What . . . and leave show business?” ☆

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# BEACHWORLD

By

Stephen King

FedShip ASN/29 fell out of the sky and crashed. After awhile two men slipped from its cloven skull like brains. They walked a little way and then stood, helmets beneath their arms, and looked at where they had finished up.

It was a beach in no need of an ocean—it was its own ocean, a sculpted sea of sand, a black and white snapshot sea frozen forever in troughs and crests and more troughs and crests.

Dunes.

Shallow ones, steep ones, smooth ones, corrugated ones. Knife-crested dunes, plane-crested dunes, irregularly crested dunes that resembled dunes piled on dunes—dune-dominos.

Dunes. But no ocean.

The valleys which were the troughs between these dunes snaked in mazy black rat-runs. If one looked at those twisting lines long enough, they might seem to spell words—black words hovering over the white dunes.

"Fuck," Shapiro said.

"Bend over," Rand said.

Shapiro started to spit, then thought better of it. Looking at all that sand made him think better of it. This was not the time to go wasting moisture, perhaps. Half buried in the sand, ASN/29 didn't look like a dying bird anymore; it looked like a gourd that had broken open and disclosed rot inside. There had been a fire. The starboard fuel-pods had all exploded.

"Too bad about Grimes," Shapiro said.

"Yeah." Rand's eyes were still roaming the sand sea, out to the limiting line of the horizon and then coming back again.

It was too bad about Grimes. Grimes was dead. Grimes was now nothing but large chunks and small chunks in the aft storage compartment. Shapiro had looked in and thought: *It looks like God decided to eat Grimes, found out he didn't taste good, and sicked him up again.* That had been too much for Shapiro's own stomach. That, and the sight of Grimes's teeth scattered across the floor of the storage compartment.

Shapiro now waited for Rand to say something intelligent, but Rand was quiet. Rand's eyes tracked over the dunes, traced the clockspring windings of the deep troughs between.

"Hey!" Shapiro said at last. "What do we do? Grimes is dead; you're in command. What do we do?"

"Do?" Rand's eyes moved back and forth, back and forth, over the stillness of the dunes. A dry, steady wind ruffled the rubberized collar of the Environmental Protection suit. "If you don't have a volleyball, I don't know."

"What are you talking about?"

"Isn't that what you're supposed to do on the beach?" Rand asked. "Play volleyball?"

Shapiro had been scared in space many times, and close to panic when the fire broke out; now, looking at Rand, he heard a rumor of fear too large to comprehend.

"It's big," Rand said dreamily, and for one moment Shapiro thought that Rand was speaking of Shapiro's own fear. "One hell of a big beach. Something like this could go on forever. You could walk a hundred miles with your surfboard under your arm and still be where you started, almost, with nothing behind you but six or seven footprints. And if you stood in the same place for five minutes, the last six or seven would be gone, too."

"Did you get a topographical compscan before we came down?" Rand was in shock, he decided. Rand was in shock but Rand was not crazy. He could give Rand a pill if he had to. And if Rand continued to spin his wheels, he could give him a shot. "Did you get a look at —"

Rand looked at him briefly. "What?"

*The green places.* That had been what he was going to say. It sounded like a quote from Psalms, and he couldn't say it. The wind made a silver chime in his mouth.

"What?" Rand asked again.

"Compscan! Compscan!" Shapiro screamed. "You ever hear of a compscan, dronehead? What's this place like? Where's the ocean at the end of the fucking beach? Where's the lakes? Where's the nearest greenbelt? Which direction? Where does the beach end?"

"End? Oh. I grok you. It never ends. No greenbelts, no ice-caps. No oceans. This is a beach in search of an ocean, mate. Dunes and dunes and dunes, and they never end."

"But what'll we do for water?"

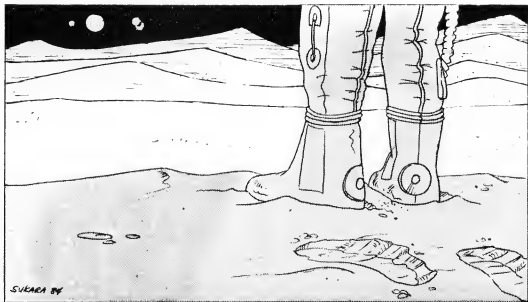
"Nothing we can do."

"The ship... it's beyond repair!"

"No shit, Sherlock."

Shapiro fell quiet. It was now either be quiet or become hysterical. He had a feeling—almost a cer-





tainty—that if he became hysterical, Rand would just go on looking at the dunes until Shapiro worked it out, or until he didn't.

What did you call a beach that never ended? Why, you called it a desert! Biggest motherfucking desert in the universe, wasn't that right?

In his head he heard Rand respond: *No shit, Sherlock.*

Shapiro stood for some time beside Rand, waiting for the man to wake up, to *do* something. After awhile his patience ran out. He began to slide and stumble back down the flank of the dune they had climbed to look around. He could feel the sand sucking against his boots. *Want to suck you down, Bill*, his mind imagined the sand saying. In his mind it was the dry, arid voice of a woman who was old but still terribly strong. *Want to suck you right down here and give you a great . . . big . . . hug.*

That made him think about how they used to take turns letting the others bury them up to their necks at the beach when he was a kid. Then it had been fun—now it scared him. So he turned that voice off—this was no time for memory lane, Christ, no—and walked through the sand with short, sharp kicking strides, trying unconsciously to mar the symmetrical perfection of its slope and surface.

"Where are you going?" Rand's voice for the first time held a note of awareness and concern.

"The beacon," Shapiro said. "I'm going to turn it on. We were on a mapped lane of travel. It'll be picked up, vectored. It's a question of time. I know the odds are shitty, but maybe somebody will come before—"

"The beacon's smashed to hell," Rand said. "It happened when we came down."

"Maybe it can be fixed," Shapiro called back over his shoulder. As he ducked through the hatchway he felt better in spite of the smells—fried wiring and a bitter whiff of freon gas. He told himself he felt better because he had thought of the beacon. No matter how paltry, the beacon offered some hope. But it wasn't the thought of the beacon that had lifted his spirits; if Rand said it was broken, it was probably most righteously broken. But he could no longer see the dunes—could no longer see that big, never-ending beach.

*That was what made him feel better.*

When he got to the top of the first dune again, struggling and panting, his temples pounding with the dry heat, Rand was still there, still staring and staring and staring. An hour had gone by. The sun stood directly above them. Rand's face was wet with perspiration. Jewels of it nestled in his eyebrows. Droplets ran down his cheeks like tears. More droplets ran down the cords of his neck and into the neck of his EP suit like drops of colorless oil running into the guts of a pretty good android.

*Dronehead I called him*, Shapiro thought with a little shudder. *Christ, that's what he looks like—not an android but a dronehead who just took a neck-shot with a very big needle.*

And Rand had been wrong after all.

"Rand?"

No answer.

"The beacon wasn't broken." There was a flicker in Rand's eyes. Then they went blank again, staring out at the mountains of sand. Frozen Shapiro had first thought them, but he supposed they moved. The wind was constant. They would move. Over a period of decades and centuries, they would... well, would *walk*. Wasn't that what they called dunes on a beach? Walking dunes? He seemed to remember that from his childhood. Or school. Or someplace, and what in the hell did it matter?

Now he saw a delicate rill of sand slip down the flank of one of them. As if it heard

*(heard what I was thinking)*

Fresh sweat on the back of his neck. All right, he was getting a touch of the whim-whams. Who wouldn't? This was a tight place they were in, very tight. And Rand seemed not to know it... or not to care.

"It had some sand in it, and the warbler was cracked, but there must have been sixty of those in Grimes's odds-and-ends box."

*Is he even hearing me?*

"I don't know how the sand got in it—it was right where it was supposed to be, in the storage compartment behind the bunk, three closed hatches between it and the outside, but—"

"Oh, sand spreads. Gets into everything. Remember going to the beach when you were a kid, Bill? You'd come home and your mother would yell at you because there was sand everywhere? Sand in the couch, sand on the kitchen table, sand down in the foot of your bed? Beach sand is very..." He gestured vaguely, and then that dreamy, unsettling smile resurfaced. "... ubiquitous."

"—but it didn't hurt it any," Shapiro continued.

"The emergency power output system is ticking over and I plugged the beacon in to it. I put on the earphones for a minute and asked for an equivalency reading at fifty parsecs. Sounds like a power saw. It's better than we could have hoped."

"No one's going to come. Not even the Beach Boys. The Beach Boys have all been dead for eight thousand years. Welcome to Surf City, Bill. Surf City *sans* surf."

Shapiro stared out at the dunes. He wondered how long the sand had been here. A trillion years? A quintillion? Had there been life here once? Maybe even something with intelligence? Rivers? Green places? Oceans to make it a real beach instead of a desert?

Shapiro stood next to Rand and thought about it. The steady wind ruffled his hair. And quite suddenly he was sure all those things had been, and he could picture how they must have ended.

The slow retreat of the cities as their waterways and outlying areas were first speckled, then dusted,

finally drifted and choked by the creeping sand.

He could see the shiny brown alluvial fans of mud, sleek as sealskins at first but growing duller and duller in color as they spread further and further out from the mouths of the rivers—out and out until they met each other. He could see sleek sealskin mud becoming reed-infested swamp, then gray, gritty till, finally shifting white sand.

He could see mountains shortening like sharpened pencils, their snow melting as the rising sand brought warm thermal updrafts against them; he could see the last few crags pointing at the sky like the fingertips of men buried alive; he could see them covered and immediately forgotten by the profoundly idiotic dunes.

What had Rand called them?

Ubiquitous.

*If you just had a vision, Billy-boy, it was a pretty goddam dreadful one.*

Oh, but no, it wasn't. It wasn't dreadful; it was peaceful. It was as quiet as a nap on a Sunday afternoon. What was more peaceful than the beach?

He shook these thoughts away. It helped to look back toward the ship.

"There isn't going to be any cavalry," Rand said. "The sand will cover us and after awhile we'll be the sand and the sand will be us. Surf city with no surf—can you catch that wave, Bill?"

And Shapiro was scared because he *could* catch it. You couldn't see all those dunes without getting it.

"Fucking dronehead asshole," he said. He went back to the ship.

And hid from the beach.

Sunset finally came. The time when, at the beach—any *real* beach—you were supposed to put away the volleyball and put on your sweats and get out the weenies and the beer. Not time to start necking yet, but almost. Time to look *forward* to the necking.

Weenies and beer and volleyballs had not been a part of ASN/29's stores.

Shapiro spent the afternoon carefully bottling all of the ship's water. He used a porta-vac to suck up that which had run out of the ruptured veins in the ship's supply system and puddled on the floor. He got the small bit left in the bottom of the shattered hydraulic systems water tank. He did not overlook even the small cylinder in the guts of the air purification system which circulated air in the storage areas.

Finally, he went into Grimes's cabin.

Grimes had kept goldfish in a circular tank constructed especially for weightless conditions. The tank was built of impact-resistant clear-polymer plastic, and had survived the crash easily. The goldfish—like their owner—had not been impact resistant. They floated in a dull orange clump at the top of the ball, which had come to rest under Grimes's bunk, along with three pairs of very dirty underwear and half a dozen porno holograph-cubes.

He held the globe aquarium for a moment, looking fixedly into it. "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well," he said suddenly, and laughed a screaming, distracted laugh. Then he got the net Grimes kept in his lockbin and dipped it into the tank. He removed the fish and then wondered what to do with them. After a moment he took them to Grimes's bed and raised his pillow.

There was sand underneath.

He put the fish there regardless, then carefully poured the water into the jerrycan he was using as a catcher. It would all have to be purified, but even if the purifiers hadn't been working, he thought that in another couple of days he wouldn't balk at drinking aquarium water just because it might have a few loose scales and a little goldfish shit in it.

He purified the water, divided it, and took Rand's share back up the side of the dune. Rand was right where he had been, as if he had never moved.

"Rand, I brought you your share of the water." He unzipped the pouch on the front of Rand's EP suit and slipped the flat plastic flask inside. He was about to press the zip-strip closed with his thumb-nail when Rand brushed his hand away. He took the flask out. Stencilled on the front was ASN/CLASS SHIP'S SUPPLIES STORAGE FLASK CL. #23196755 STERILE WHEN SEAL IS UNBROKEN. The seal was broken now, of course; Shapiro had had to fill the bottle up.

"I purified —"

Rand opened his fingers. The flask fell into the sand with a soft plop. "Don't want it."

"Don't . . . Rand, what's wrong with you? Jesus Christ, will you *stop* it?"

Rand did not reply.

Shapiro bent over and picked up storage flask #23196755. He brushed off the grains of sand clinging to the sides as if they were huge, swollen germs.

"What's *wrong* with you?" Shapiro repeated. "Is it shock? Do you think that's what it is? Because I can give you a pill . . . or a shot. But it's getting to me, I don't mind telling you. You just standing out here looking at the next forty miles of nothing! It's *sand*! Just sand!"

"It's a beach," Rand said dreamily. "Want to make a sand-castle?"

"Okay, good," Shapiro said. "I'm going to go get a needle and an amp of Yellowjack. If you want to act like a goddam dronehead, I'll treat you like one."

"If you try to inject me with something, you better be quiet when you sneak up behind me," Rand said mildly. "Otherwise, I'll break your arm."

He could do it, too. Shapiro, the astrogator, weighed a hundred and forty pounds and stood five-five. Physical combat was not his specialty. He grunted an oath and turned away, back to the ship, holding Rand's flask.

"I think it's alive," Rand said. "I'm actually pretty sure of it."

Shapiro looked back at him and then out at the dunes. The sunset had given them a gold filigree at their smooth, sweeping caps, a filigree that shaded delicately down to blackest ebony in the troughs; on the next dune, ebony shaded back to gold. Gold to black. Black to gold. Gold to black and black to gold and gold to —

Shapiro blinked his eyes rapidly, and rubbed a hand over them.

"I have several times felt this particular dune move under my feet," Rand told Shapiro. "It moves very gracefully. It is like feeling the tide. I can smell its smell on the air, and the smell is like salt."

"You're crazy," Shapiro said. He was so terrified that he felt as if his brains had turned to glass.

Rand did not reply. Rand's eyes searched the dunes, which went from gold to black to gold to black in the sunset.

Shapiro went back to the ship.

Rand stayed on the dune all night, and all the next day.

Shapiro looked out and saw him. Rand had taken off his EP suit, and the sand had almost covered it. Only one sleeve stuck out, forlorn and supplicating. The sand above and below it reminded Shapiro of a pair of lips sucking with toothless greed at a tender morsel. Shapiro felt a crazy desire to pelt up the side of the dune and rescue Rand's EP suit.

He did not.

He sat in his cabin and waited for the rescue ship. The smell of freon had dissipated. It was replaced by the even less desirable smell of Grimes decaying.

The rescue ship did not come that day or that night or on the third day.

Sand somehow appeared in Shapiro's cabin, although the hatchway was closed and the seal still appeared perfectly tight. He sucked the little puddles of sand up with the porta-vac as he had sucked up puddles of spilled water on that first day.

He was very thirsty all the time. His flask was nearly empty already.

He thought he had begun to smell salt on the air; in his sleep he heard the sound of gulls.

And he could hear the sand.

The steady wind was moving the first dune closer to the ship. His cabin was still okay — thanks to the porta-vac — but the sand was already taking over the rest. Mini-dunes had reached through the blown locks and laid hold of ASN/29. It sifted in tendrils and membranes through the vents. There was a drift in one of the blown tanks.

Shapiro's face grew gaunt and pebbly with beard shadow.

Near sunset of the third day, he climbed up the dune to check on Rand. He thought about taking a hypodermic then rejected it. It was a lot more than shock; he knew that now. Rand was insane. It would be best if he died quickly. And it looked as if that was exactly what was going to happen.

Shapiro was gaunt; Rand was emaciated. His body was a scrawny stick. His legs formerly rich and thick with iron-pumper's muscle, were now slack and pale and droopy. The skin hung on them like loose socks that keep falling down. He was wearing only his undershorts, and they were red nylon, and they looked absurdly like a ball-hugger bathing suit. A light beard had begun to grow on his face, fuzzing his hollow cheeks and chin. His beard was the color of beach sand. His hair, formerly a listless brown shade, had bleached out to a near blonde. It hung over his forehead. Only his eyes, peering through the fringe of his hair with bright blue intensity, still lived fully. They studied the beach  
(the dunes goddammit the DUNES)  
relentlessly.

Now Shapiro saw a bad thing. It was a very bad thing indeed. He saw that Rand's face was turning into a sand dune. His beard and his hair were choking his skin.

"You," Shapiro said, "are going to die. If you don't come down to the ship and drink, you are going to die."

Rand said nothing.

"Is that what you want?"

Nothing. There was the vacuous snuffle of the wind, but no more. Shapiro observed that the creases of Rand's neck were filling up with sand.

"The only thing I want," Rand said in a faint, far-away voice like the wind, "is my Beach Boys tapes. They're in my cabin."

"Fuck you!" Shapiro said furiously. "But do you know what I hope? I hope a ship comes before you die. I want to see you holler and scream when they pull you away from your precious goddam beach. I want to see what happens then!"

"Beach'll get you, too," Rand said. His voice was empty and rattling, like wind inside a split gourd—a gourd which has been left in a field at the end of October's last harvest. "Take a listen, Bill. Listen to the wave."

Rand cocked his head. His mouth, half-open, revealed his tongue. It was as shriveled as a dry sponge.

Shapiro heard something.

He heard the dunes. They sang songs of Sunday afternoon at the beach—naps on the beach with no dreams. Long naps. Mindless peace. The sound of crying gulls. Shifting, thoughtless particles. Walking dunes. He heard... and was drawn. Drawn toward the dunes.

"You hear it," Rand said.

Shapiro reached into his nose and dug with two fingers until it bled. Then he could close his eyes; his

thoughts came slowly and clumsily together. His heart was racing.

*I was almost like Rand. Jesus!... it almost had me!*

He opened his eyes again and saw that Rand had become a conch shell on a long deserted beach, straining forward toward all the mysteries of an undead sea, staring out at the dunes and the dunes and the dunes.

No more, Shapiro moaned inside himself.

*Oh, but listen to this wave,* the dunes whispered back. Against his better judgment, Shapiro listened.

Then his better judgment ceased to exist.

Shapiro thought: *I could hear better if I sat down.*

He sat down at Rand's feet and put his heels on his thighs like a Yaqui Indian and listened.

He heard the Beach Boys and the Beach Boys were singing about fun, fun, fun. He heard them singing that the girls on the beach were all within reach. He heard—

—a hollow sighing of the wind, not in his ear but in the canyon between right brain and left brain—he heard that sighing somewhere in the blackness which is spanned only by the suspension bridge of the corpus colossium, which connects conscious thought to the infinite. He felt no hunger, no thirst, no heat, no fear. He heard only the voice in the emptiness.

And a ship came.

It came swooping out of the sky, afterburners scratching a long orange track from right to left. Thunder belted the delta-wave topography, and several dunes collapsed like bullet-path braindamage. The thunder ripped Billy Shapiro's head open and for a moment he was torn both ways, *ripped*, torn down the middle—

Then he was up on his feet.

"Ship!" He screamed. "Holy fuck! Ship! Ship! SHIP!"

It was a belt trader, dirty and bugged by five hundred—or five thousand—years of clan service. It surfed through the air, banged crudely upright, skidded. The captain blew jets and fused sand into black glass. Shapiro cheered the wound.

Rand looked around like a man awaking from a deep dream.

"Tell it to go away, Billy."

"You don't understand." Shapiro was shambling around, shaking his fists in the air. "You'll be all right—"

He broke toward the dirty trader in big, leaping strides, like a kangaroo running from a ground fire. The sand clutched at him. Shapiro kicked it away. Fuck you, sand. I got a honey back in Hansonville. Sand never had no honey. Beach never had no hard-on.

The trader's hull split. A gangplank popped out like a tongue. A man strode down it behind three sampler androids and a guy built into treads that was surely the captain. He wore a beret with a clan symbol on it, anyway.

One of the androids waved a sampler wand at him. Shapiro batted it away. He fell on his knees in front of the captain and embraced the treads which had replaced the captain's dead legs.

"The dunes . . . Rand . . . no water . . . alive . . . hypnotized him . . . dronehead world . . . I . . . thank God . . ."

A steel tentacle whipped around Shapiro and yanked him away on his gut. Dry sand whispered underneath him like laughter.

"It's okay," the captain said. "*By-at shel! Me! Me! Gat!*"

The android dropped Shapiro and backed away, clittering distractedly to itself.

"All this way for a fucking Fed!" the Captain exclaimed bitterly.

Shapiro wept. It hurt, not just in his head, but in his liver.

"Dud! *Gee-yat! Gat! Water-for-him-Cry!*"

The man who had been in the lead tossed him a nipples low-grav bottle. Shapiro upended it and sucked greedily, spilling crystal-cold water into his mouth, down his chin, in dribbles that darkened his tunic, which had bleached to the color of bone. He choked, vomited, then drank again.

Dud and the captain watched him closely. The androids clittered.

At last Shapiro wiped his mouth and sat up. He felt both sick and well.

"You Shapiro?" the Captain asked.

Shapiro nodded.

"Clan affiliation?"

"None."

"ASN number?"

"29."

"Crew?"

"Three. One dead. The other—Rand—up there." He pointed but did not look.

The Captain's face did not change. Dud's face did.

"The beach got him," Shapiro said. He saw their questioning, veiled looks. "Shock . . . maybe. He seems hypnotized. He keeps talking about the . . . the Beach Boys . . . never mind, you wouldn't know. He wouldn't drink or eat. He's bad off."

"Dud. Take one of the andies and get him down from there." He shook his head. "Fed ship. Christ. No salvage."

Dud nodded. A few moments later he was scrambling up the side of the dune with one of the andies. The andy looked like a twenty-year-old surfer who might make dope money on the side servicing bored widows, but his stride gave him away even more than the segmented tentacles which grew from his armpits. The stride, common to all androids, was the slow, reflective, almost painful stride of an aging English butler with hemorrhoids.

There was a buzz from the Captain's dashboard.

"I'm here."

"This is Gomez, Cap. We got a situation here.

Compscan and surface telemetry show us a very unstable surface. There's no bedrock that we can targ. We're resting on our own burn, and right now that may be the hardest thing on the whole planet. Trouble is, the burn itself is starting to settle."

"Recommendation?"

"We ought to get out."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago."

"You're a laugh riot, Gomez."

The Captain punched a button and the communicator went out.

Shapiro's eyes were rolling. "Look, never mind Rand. He's had it."

"I'm taking you both back," the Captain said. "I got no salvage, but the Federation ought to pay something for the two of you . . . not that either of you are worth much, as far as I can see. He's crazy and you're chickenshit."

"No . . . you don't understand. You —"

The Captain's cunning yellow eyes gleamed.

"You got any contra?" he asked.

"Captain . . . look . . . please —"

"Because if you do, there's no sense just leaving it here. Tell me what it is and where it is. I'll split seventy-thirty. Standard salvor's fee. Couldn't do any better than that, hey? You —"

The burn suddenly tilted beneath them. Quite noticeably tilted. A horn somewhere inside the trader began to blat with muffled regularity. The communicator on the Captain's dashboard went off again.

"*There!*" Shapiro screamed. "*There, do you see what you're up against? You want to talk about contraband now? WE HAVE GOT TO GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!*"

"Shut up, handsome, or I'll have one of these guys sedate you," the Captain said. His voice was serene but his eyes had changed. He thumbed the communicator.

"Cap, I got ten degrees of tilt and we're getting more. The elevator's going down, but it's going on an angle. We're still got time, but not much. The ship's going to fall over."

"The struts will hold her."

"No, sir. Begging the captain's pardon, they won't."

"Start firing sequences, Gomez."

"Thank you, sir." The relief in Gomez's voice was unmistakable. "Anything else?"

"Send Chang down. One of these old boys is badly dehydrated."

"Yes, sir."

Dud and the android were coming back down the flank of the dune. Rand wasn't with them. The andy fell further and further behind. And now a strange thing happened. The andy fell over on its face. The Captain frowned. It did not fall as an andy is supposed to fall—which is to say, like a human being,

more or less. It was as if someone had pushed over a mannequin in a department store. It fell over like that. Thump, and a little tan cloud of sand puffed up from around it.

Dud went back and knelt by it. The andy's legs were still moving as if it still dreamed, in the 1.5 million freon-cooled micro-circuits that made up its mind, that it still walked. But the leg movements were slow and clacking. They stopped. Smoke began to come out of its pores and its tentacles shivered in the sand. It was gruesomely like watching a human die. A deep grinding came from inside it: *Graaaagggg!*

"Full of sand," Shapiro whispered. "It's got Beach Boys religion."

The Captain glanced at him impatiently. "Don't be ridiculous, man. The thing could walk through a sandstorm and not get a grain inside it."

"Not on *this* world."

The burn settled again. The trader was now clearly canted. There was a low groan as the struts took more weight.

"Leave it!" The Captain bawled at Dud. "Leave it, leave it! *Gee-yat! Come-me-for-Cry!*"

Dud came, leaving the andy to walk face-down in the sand.

"What a balls-up," the Captain muttered.

He and Dud engaged in a conversation spoken entirely in a rapid pidgin dialect which Shapiro was able to follow to some degree. Dud told the Captain that Rand had refused to come. The andy had tried to grab Rand, but with no force. Even then it was moving jerkily, and strange grating sounds were coming from inside it. Also, it had begun to recite a combination of galactic strip-mining coordinates and a catalogue of the Captain's folk-music tapes. Dud himself had then closed with Rand. They had struggled briefly. The Captain told Dud that if Dud had allowed a man who had been standing three days in the hot sun to get the better of him, that maybe he ought to get another First.

Dud's face darkened with embarrassment, but his grave, concerned look never faltered. He slowly turned his head, revealing four deep furrows in his cheek. They were welling slowly. "*Him-gat big indics*," Dud said. "*Strong-for-Cry. Him-gat for umby.*"

"*Umby him for-Cry?*" The Captain was looking at Dud sternly.

Dud nodded. "*Umby. Beyat-she. Umby for-Cry.*"

Shapiro had been frowning, conning his tired, frightened mind for that word. Now it came. *Umby*. It meant crazy. *He's strong, for Christ's sake. Strong because he's crazy. He's got big ways, big force. Because he's crazy.*

Big ways... or maybe it meant big waves. He wasn't sure. Either way it came to the same.

*Umby.*

The ground shifted underneath them again, and the sand blew across Shapiro's boots.

From behind them came the hollow *ka-thud, ka-thud, ka-thud* of the breather-tubes opening. Shapiro thought it one of the most lovely sounds he had ever heard in his life.

The Captain sat deep in thought, a weird centaur whose lower half was treads and plates instead of horse. Then he looked up and thumbed the communicator.

"Gomez, send Excellent Montoya down here with a tranquilizer gun."

"Acknowledged."

The Captain looked at Shapiro. "Now, on top of everything else, I've lost an android worth your salary for the next ten years. Also, I'm pissed off now. I mean to have your buddy."

"Captain," Shapiro could not help licking his lips. He knew this was a very ill-chosen thing to do. He did not want to appear mad, hysterical, or craven, and the Captain had apparently decided he was all three. Licking his lips like that would only add to the impression... but he simply couldn't help himself. "Captain, I cannot impress on you too strongly the need to get off this world as soon as possible."

"Can it, dronehead," the Captain said, not unkindly.

A thin scream rose from the top of the nearest dune.

"*Don't touch me! Don't come near me! Leave me alone! All of you!*"

"*Big-indics gat umby*," Dud said gravely.

"*Ma-him, yeah-mon*," the Captain returned, and then turned to Shapiro. "He really is bad off, isn't he?"

Shapiro shuddered. "You don't know. You just —"

The burn settled again, and now the tilt was alarmingly noticeable under their feet. The struts were groaning louder than ever. The communicator crackled. Gomez's voice was thin, a little unsteady.

"We have to get out of here right now, Cap!"

"All right." A brown man appeared on the gangway. He held a long pistol in one gloved hand. The Captain pointed at Rand. "*Ma-him, for-Cry. Can?*"

Excellent Montoya, unperturbed by the tilting earth that was not earth but only sand fused to glass (and there were deep cracks running through it now, Shapiro saw), unbothered by the groaning struts or the eerie sight of an android that now appeared to be digging its own grave with its feet, studied Rand's thin figure for a moment.

"Can," he said.

"*Gat! Gat-for-Cry!*" The Captain spat to one side. "Shoot his pecker off, I don't care," he said. "Just as long as he's still breathing when we ship."

Excellent Montoya raised the pistol. The gesture was apparently two-thirds casual and one-third careless, but Shapiro, even in his state of near-panic,

noted the way Montoya's head tilted to one side as he lined the barrel up. Like many in the clans, the gun would be nearly a part of him, like pointing his own finger.

There was a hollow *fooh!* as he squeezed the trigger and the tranquilizer dart blew out of the barrel.

A hand reached out of the dune and clawed it down.

It was a large brown hand, wavery, made of sand. It simply reached up, in defiance of the wind, and smothered the momentary glitter of the dart. Then the sand fell back with a heavy *thrrrrap*. No hand. Impossible to believe there *had* been. But they had all seen it.

"*Giddy-hump,*" the Captain said in an almost conversational voice.

Excellent Montoya fell on his knees. "*Aidy-May-for-Cry, big-gat come! Saw-hoh got belly-gat-for-Cry!—*"

Numbly, Shapiro realized Montoya was saying a rosary in pidgin.

Up on the dune, Rand was jumping up and down, shaking his fists at the sky, screeching thinly in triumph.

*A hand. It was a HAND. He's right; it's alive, alive, alive—*

"*Indic!*" the Captain said sharply to Montoya. "*Cannit! Gat!*"

Montoya shut up. His eyes touched on the capering figure of Rand, and then he looked away. His face was full of superstitious horror nearly medieval in quality.

"Okay," the Captain said. "I've had enough. I quit. We're going."

He showed two buttons on his dashboard. The motor that should have swivelled him neatly around so he faced up the gangplank again did not hum; it squealed and grated. The Captain cursed. The burn shifted again.

"Captain!" Gomez. In a panic.

The Captain slammed in another button and the treads began to move backward up the gangplank.

"Guide me," the Captain said to Shapiro. "I got no fucking rear-view mirror. It was a hand, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"I want to get out of here," the Captain said. "It's been fourteen years since I had a cock, but right now I feel like I'm pissing myself."

*Thrrap!* A dune suddenly collapsed over the gangway. Only it wasn't a dune; it was an arm.

"Fuck, oh fuck," the Captain said.

On his dune, Rand capered and screeched.

Now the treads of the Captain's lower half began to grind. The mini-tank of which the Captain's head and shoulders were the turret now began to judder backward.

"What —"

The treads locked. Sand splurged out from between the treads.

"*Pick me up!*" the Captain bawled to the two remaining androids. "*Now! RIGHT NOW!*"

Their tentacles curled around the tread sprockets as they picked him up—he looked ridiculously like a faculty member about to be tossed in a blanket by a bunch of roughhousing fraternity boys. He was thumping the communicator.

"*Gomez! Final firing sequence! Now! Now!*"

The dune at the foot of the gangplank shifted. Became a hand. A large brown hand that began to scabble up the incline.

Shrieking, Shapiro bolted from that hand.

Cursing, the Captain was carried away from it.

The gangplank was pulled up. The hand fell off and became sand again. The hatchway irised closed. The engines howled. No time for a cough; no time for anything like that. Shapiro dropped into a crash-fold position on the bulkhead and was promptly smashed flat by the acceleration. Before unconsciousness washed over him, it seemed he could feel sand grasping at the trader with muscular brown arms, straining to hold them down—

Then they were up and away.

Rand watched them go. He was sitting down. When the track of the trader's jets was at last gone from the sky, he turned his eyes out to the placid endlessness of the dunes.

"We got a '34 wagon and we call it a woody," he croaked to the empty, moving sand. "It ain't very cherry; it's an oldy but a goody."

Slowly, reflectively, he began to cram handful after handful of sand into his mouth. He swallowed . . . swallowed . . . swallowed. Soon his belly was a swollen barrel and sand began to drift over his legs. ☆



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SCREENED  
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# SPEAK

By  
Henry Slesar

"Hello. Phyllis? This is Manny. I'm at the office."

"Wait a minute —"

"No, please, don't interrupt. I gotta do this my way, Phyllis. This one time you should give me the last word. Ha, that's like a joke, the last word. You know what I'm sitting here with? Dr. Pfeiffer's good-night express, those pills he prescribed me last month for sleeping. I got the whole bottle right here in front of me. Empty."

"Manny —"

"You know why it's empty? On account of they're all inside me, all those nice little white pills pushing against the stomach valves like in the commercial. I wonder if they work fast, fast, fast? I sure hope so — you know me when I make up my mind to do something. This morning, when I got the call from Rodolfo at the Garden, I said to myself, Manny, anybody else in your shoes would kill himself. So why not, I said. Why am I so different from anybody else? I was gonna do it at home, but then I thought, what for? Why should I mess things up for you? Better I should get Pfeiffer's prescription filled at lunch and do it in the office. What could be a more fitting place, this lousy, crummy office?"

"Manny, please listen to me —"

"Maybe you never knew how bad things were with me, maybe I didn't cry enough. You know what I always told you, Phyllis — show business is no business. I would have been better off going into the florist racket with your brother like your family wanted. But kill me, I had to be a circus type. I couldn't be a regular Joe Shnook making paper boxes or wrapping up posies, not me. I had sawdust in my blood. In this day and age, right? They got Cinerama, they got color television, they got World's Fairs, and what does Manny give them? Freaks and novelties, right? Smart, huh? Some genius, your husband, right?"

"Manny, for Pete's sake —"

"But that wasn't bad enough. I couldn't even do that right. All I wanted was something unique, something different, and what do I get? One fake after another. One flop after another. That dumb magician from *Argentina*. That pinheaded cretin. And that bearded lady. Who could forget *him*, that big phony. One after another, ponies, floppolas. Well I'm through. Through with the whole mess —"

"Manny —"

"Yeah, I know, I know. You want to hear what happened to the Siamese twins. That's what finally broke my back, Phyllis, that was the straw. This morning, I get a call from Rodolfo at the Arena. Some wise-guy reporter from the *News* spotted one of the twins in a bar on Third Avenue. Yeah, *one* of the twins. Rodolfo threw me out of the show, of course. He swears I'll never work another circus or carry in the country, and he can do it. No, come to think it, he can't do nothing to me anymore. Nobody can . . ."

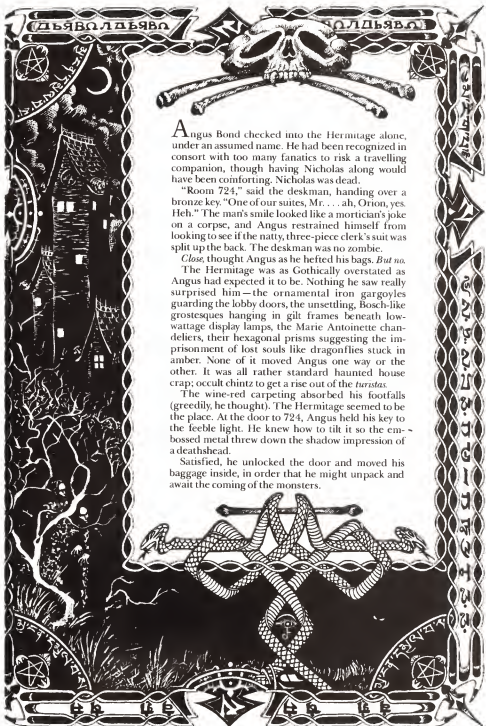
"Manny! Please!"

"It's just no use, Phyllis. All these years I kept saying to myself — *one* act'll do it. One big break. One really great novelty. One blockbuster and I'll be right on top. But you know what I think? I wouldn't know a great act if I saw one. I'm a loser, Phyllis. I'm a wrong-guesser. Nothing good ever comes my way, because I got nothing going for me. That's the truth."

"Manny —"

"So long, Phyllis. You've been a good wife to me and I wish I'd treated you better. But take my word for it — you'll be better off without me . . ."

"Manny, will you please *listen*? This *isn't* Phyllis! Phyllis isn't here, she went out to get some groceries. Manny, this is Rex. Your dog. Your *dog*. I don't know what came over me. When I heard the phone ringing, I just *had* to answer. I knocked it off the table with my paw and I started talking. Manny, can you hear me? It's Rex! Manny, say something. Please! Manny, are you there? Row! Manny! Manny!" ☆



Angus Bond checked into the Hermitage alone, under an assumed name. He had been recognized in consort with too many fanatics to risk a travelling companion, though having Nicholas along would have been comforting. Nicholas was dead.

"Room 724," said the deskman, handing over a bronze key. "One of our suites, Mr. . . . ah, Orion, yes. Heh." The man's smile looked like a mortician's joke on a corpse, and Angus restrained himself from looking to see if the natty, three-piece clerk's suit was split up the back. The deskman was no zombie.

*Close*, thought Angus as he hefted his bags. *But no*. The Hermitage was as Gothically overstated as Angus had expected it to be. Nothing he saw really surprised him—the ornamental iron gargoyles guarding the lobby doors, the unsettling, Bosch-like grotesques hanging in gilt frames beneath low-wattage display lamps, the Marie Antoinette chandeliers, their hexagonal prisms suggesting the imprisonment of lost souls like dragonflies stuck in amber. None of it moved Angus one way or the other. It was all rather standard haunted house crap; occult chintz to get a rise out of the *touristas*.

The wine-red carpeting absorbed his footfalls (greedily, he thought). The Hermitage seemed to be the place. At the door to 724, Angus held his key to the feeble light. He knew how to tilt it so the embossed metal threw down the shadow impression of a death'shead.

Satisfied, he unlocked the door and moved his baggage inside, in order that he might unpack and await the coming of the monsters.

## VISITATION

By

David Schow

The knock on the door jolted him to instant wariness. Angus took a bite out of a hard roll and left it behind on the leather-topped table with the sausage and cheese he had brought.

It was the zombie-like clerk, carrying a tarnished salver bearing a brilliantly white calling card, face-down. Angus noted that the clerk seemed to smell like the sachets tucked into wardrobes by grandmothers to fend off mildew. The stark whiteness of the card cast deathly shadows on the man's pale features. It seemed to light up the hallway much more efficiently than the guttering yellow bulbs in the brass sconces.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," he said, with all the verve of a ventriloquist's dummy.

Angus picked up the card. It bore two words:

*Imperative.*

*Bray.*

The clerk stood fast. When Angus realized why, he decided to test the water a little.

"Just a minute." He hurried off to fumble briefly through the depths of his greatcoat. There was the telltale clink of change, and he returned to the door with a silver dollar. Instead of placing it on the salver, he contrived to drop it, apparently accidentally, so that the clerk caught it, smoothly interrupting its fall with his free hand. He wore dusty butler's gloves that were going threadbare at the fingertips. He weighed the coin in the palm of his hand.

For just a second the air in the draftless hallway seemed to darken and roil thickly, like cream in hot coffee. The clerk's features darkened, too, making his eyes appear to glow, the way a lightbulb flares just before it burns out. He sucked a quick gulp of air, as though dizzied by an abrupt stab of nausea. His features fought to remain whole, shifting like lard in a skillet, and Angus heard a distant, mad wail. It all took less than a second.

The clerk let the tip slide from the palm of his hand, to rattle in the bowl of the metal dish. The queasy, death-rictus smile split across his face again, and he said, "Thank you, Sir."

He left. Angus closed his door, and nodded to himself in affirmation.

The stranger was swaddled in fog-dampened tweeds and crowned with a road-weary homburg that had seen better days a few decades earlier. The initial impression left by the bearing of the man was that he was very old — not withered, or incapacitated

in the way of those who wore years gracefully, but old in the sense of worldly experience. An *old* man. Angus felt a sting of kinship here, deep in the midst of hazardous and alien territory.

"You are Angus Bond?" said the old man, arching a snow-white eyebrow. "I am Turquine Bray."

"Nicholas Bray's father?" said Angus, ignoring that no one at the Hermitage knew his real name. The stranger had obviously just arrived.

"Grandfather. Paternal. His father was a null spiritual quantity, neither evil, nor good, like most in the world. He lived out his merchant's life, and desired nothing but material things. Tawdriness. Despair. The sum of his presence on the planet was insignificant, and a more horrible fate than that I cannot think of."

The two men shook hands in the dank lobby of the Hermitage.

"I cannot say I am pleased to meet you at last, sir," Bray said. "But I am relieved. Shall we walk outside? The atmosphere in here could make a vulture's eyes water . . . as it is no doubt intended to do."

The clerk's basilisk gaze tracked them until they passed through the cataracted glass of the lobby's imposing double doors. Outside, the slate-gray bulk of the Hermitage's castellated architecture monitored them dispassionately. It diminished behind them as they walked into the dense Southern Kentucky woodland that made up the grounds.

"Gloomy," said Bray. "All this place needs is a tarn."

"Notice how the foliage grows together in tangles?" said Angus. "It meshes, with no nutritional support from the earth. The soil is nearly pure alkaline; I checked it. The stuff grows, and yet is dead. It laces together to keep out the sunlight — see? It's always overcast here."

"The appointments of that hotel are certainly Grand Guignol-ish. Like a Hollywood set for a horror film."

"Rather like the supposed 'ambiance' one gains by patronizing a more expensive restaurant," said Angus. "I suspect you hit it on the head when you mentioned 'atmosphere.' That seems to be the purpose of all this theatrical embroidery — supernatural furniture. Atmosphere."

"Hm." Bray stepped laboriously over a rotting tree trunk. "Sinister chic."

The iron-colored mud stole dark footprints from them as they walked, their breath condensing

whitely in the late January chill. Frost still rimed the dead vegetation, even in late afternoon. Angus was glad he had trotted out his muffler. If Poe could have seen this place, he mused, he would have been scared into a writing diet of musical comedy.

"Have you a room?" said Angus, after both men had stood in contemplative silence for a moment.

"I wanted to assure myself of your presence here, first."

"You followed me, then?" said Angus. "For whatever purpose? You certainly know of Nicholas' death already."

"I need you, Mr. Bond, to tell me the manner in which he died."

Angus sighed with resignation. "Mr. Bray," he said in a tone often rehearsed, "do you know just who I am?"

Bray's steely, chrome-colored eyes shot up to meet with Angus' watery blue ones, and he smiled a cursory smile. "You are Angus Gwyllm Orion Bond. Until roughly two years ago, your profession was that of occult debunker—exposer of supernatural hoaxes. Absolute bane of fraudulent mediums, scamming astrologers, warlocks who were more con-men than sorcerers, and all the pop salesmen of lizard's tooth and owl's wing. Until two years ago."

Bray's breath plumed out as he spoke. His speech was almost a recitation; Angus was impressed with the research.

"Two years ago, you vanished from the considerable media time and space you commanded. You evaporated from the airwaves; the talk shows. Rumor had you seeking the counsel of spiritualists and dabbling in magic yourself. Though you wound up debunking yourself, your books and other franchised items sold better than ever. I presume you've been supporting your now-private life with royalties?"

"Something like that."

"It was precisely that time that you met up with my grandson. Nicholas was the antithesis of his father—a fantastic capacity for intellect and change. You know how he died."

"It ties together. The change in my life. Nick's death. I'm not sure you'd—"

"I am prepared for the outrageous, Mr. Bond. But I'm only interested in the truth. If the truth is merely outrageous, fire away."

"Nicholas came to my estate one night. He was frantic, pounding on the door, sweating, panicked. He couldn't tell me why. He had just moved into his new home at the time—do you recall it?"

"It was next to your estate. The Spilsbury mansion. Where all those actors were slaughtered by the religious cultists in the mid-1960s."

"Yes," said Angus. "Of course, by the time Nick moved in, that was ancient history. That place's allotted fifteen minutes of pop fame has been used up years before."

Bray smiled again.

"I went back with him. It was clear he was unnerfed by the fact that the place *felt* wrong to him. The closest he could speculate was that it still 'felt evil.' We sat, and drank by the fireplace, and reasoned. It happened about forty-five minutes later." Angus felt a tiny stab of embarrassment at the dramatic way he was relating things. But then . . .

"It was the first time I ever witnessed an interface," he said, simply. "Mr. Bray, are you aware how supernatural agencies function physically? What enables the paranormal to co-exist with the normal universe—yours and mine?"

"Assuming its reality," said Bray, "I'd speculate that it would be like an alternate dimension."

"Good. But not a physical dimension, not like a parallel world just staggered out of sync with our own. The supernatural is a matter of power potentials. It accumulates, in degrees, like a nuclear pile approaching critical mass. When there's too much, it blows off steam, venting into the real world, *our* world, becoming a temporary reality, sometimes only for a second or two."

"Accumulates? Like dust?" said Bray incredulously. "How?"

"It happened every time someone knocks on wood. Or crosses their fingers for luck, or says *gesundheit*. Every time one avoids walking under a ladder or lighting three on a match. Every time someone makes a joke about ghosts and doesn't disbelieve what he's saying one hundred percent; every time somebody uses a superstitious expression as a reflex cliché—*let the sandman come and take you away; don't let the bogeyman get you*. Every time some idiot in a church mentions the Devil. *Anytime* anyone seriously considers any of the millions of minor-league bad luck totems. It compounds itself *exactly* like dust, Mr. Bray—each of those things is a conscious, willful act that requires a minute portion of physical energy in some way. The paranormal energy simultaneously prompted by such action remains unperceived, but it is there, and it stacks up, one imperceptible degree at a time. Just like dust. And when you get an extra infusion of high-potency metaphysical force—"

"Like that Jim Jones thing?" said Bray. "Or the Spilsbury murders?"

"Precisely. You boost the backlog of power that much more. Whenever it reaches its own critical mass, it discharges into our reality. The house that Nicholas had moved into was a metaphysical stress point; it was still weak, thanks to the Spilsbury thing. A break point that had not completely healed."

"And during this—this interface, all that accumulated power blew through into my grandson's living room?" Bray shook his head. "I find that difficult to believe."

"Too outrageous?" said Angus, stopping suddenly.

Bray's expression dissolved into neutral. "Go on."

"That night, the 'weakness' was not only at the juncture point of that house, but elsewhere. Tempo-

rally, it was a 'weak' time period. Nick was in an agitated fear state—a 'weak' receptive mental condition. But this phenomenon has no regular characteristic save that of overload—you can't count on it venting itself at any regular time, or place, or under any regular conditions. It vented somewhere else that night, and because of the weakened conditions we caught a squirt of it—*bam!* Two or three seconds; a drop of water from a flood. The flood went somewhere else."

Now Bray was frankly interested. "What was it like?"

"I got an impression of tremendous motive force," said Angus. "Blinding black light; a contradictory thing, I know, but there. The air felt pushed out of my lungs by a giant hand. Everything loose in the living room was blown free like summer chaff in a hurricane. Overpowering nausea. Vertigo. Disorientation. I was afraid, but it was a vague, unfocused kind of terror. It was much worse for Nicholas."

"You see, he—like most people—had latent beliefs in supernatural things. I did not. Too many years debunking special effects led to an utter skepticism for things that go bump in the night—for me. I saw raw, 'evil energy'. Nicholas saw whatever he did not totally disbelieve. You might see demons, ghouls, vampire lycanthropes, the Old Ones all hungering for your flesh and soul, dragons gobbling you up and farting brimstone, Saton browsing through your body with a hot fondue fork..."

Bray was taken aback, obviously considering what such an experience would mean for him, given his life's collection of myth and superstition, of fairy-tale monsters and real-life guilts. All of it would manifest to his eyes. *All* of it, at once. He said, "You mean that every superstitious fear I've ever had is waiting to eat me, on the other side of a paranormal power overload?"

"Not as such," said Angus. "Your belief is what makes it real. True disbelief renders it unreal, back into energy—which is what I saw. But that energy, filtered through Nick's mind, made a monster. He said he was trying to hold the doorway to Hell shut, and something horrifying was pulling from the other side. It gave a good yank and the doorway cracked open for a split instant before the briefness of the 'squirt' closed it for good—but Nick, in that instant, saw what was trying to get him. It scared him white."

Bray was quiet for a long moment. Then: "He moved in with you shortly afterward?"

"Yes."

"You could not debunk the supernatural after that?"

"Not and do it with anything like conviction. Investigating the nature of the phenomenon became paramount."

"Nicholas helped you?"

"He was just the ally I needed. He had a propensity for pure research and a keen mind for deduc-

tion. We collected data and he indexed it. Using a computer, we were able to produce flow charts. One of the first things we discovered was the presence of 'pressure points' in the time flow—specific dates that were receptive to the power burst, as the Spillbury house had been. Lammas, Beltane, Candlemas, Hallowe'en. Almost all holidays. There are short bursts, long bursts, multi-directional bursts, weak and strong ones. Sometimes the proximity of a weak date will magnetize the power, attracting it to a particular time. But most of it concentrates at one physical place. Of course, there might be a dozen such outbursts in a day. Consider Jack the Ripper's reign over Spitalfields, or World War Two—the phenomenon would damn near become cyclical, feeding on itself."

"I see," said Bray. "But what about—"

"Nicholas?" Angus interrupted his meandering walk, hands in pockets. "I think the road is just above us, there. Shall we climb up out of this muck and make our way back? I have a flask of arrack in my room, to help cut the chill."

"Thank you," Bray said, as Angus helped him through a web of creepers.

"Nicholas was very good at charts," said Angus. "He cross-matched all the power bursts—he called them 'squirts', by the way—to ebb and flow grids, and to longitudes and latitudes. He calculated in 'weak spots' and compensated for them. He synthesized a means whereby he could predict, with reasonable accuracy, the location and date of a future 'squirt'. Sometimes he was wrong."

"But he was right for at least one," said Bray.

"In Manhattan," said Angus, "in a delapidated, condemned office complex called the Dixon Building, he and I faced a full-power blast, alone."

"Oh my god—"

"God is right. Nicholas was eaten alive by the demon on the other side of the door. He still believed."

The two old men scrambled up onto the road facing the Hermitage, in the distance. It loomed darkly against the overcast sky, in silhouette, like a dinosaur waiting for dinner.

"In that hotel, tonight, at precisely 1:30 a.m., there will be an interface such as I've described. On paper, at least, it's one of the biggest I've ever seen. There are a lot of superstitious people out there in the world. I can show you the graphs, in my room."

Together, Angus and Bray entered the maw of the Hermitage.

"Have you taken stock of the clientele here yet?" said Bray, as Angus shrugged his heavy coat. Neither of them had given up their sweaters, and Angus (since he had not been able to coax the antediluvian steam heater into more output) kept his sweater on in the room. The arrack had been forestalled when Bray produced his private stock, a travel decanter of Laphroaig, from the depths of his own overcoat.

"There's a word for this power," said Angus.

"Some call it *mana*. It's like electricity—not really good or evil in itself, but available to those who know how to harness it. I'm afraid I'm not the only one who can chart the interfaces. Others might; others who would embrace the power for evil ends. That desk clerk is a great representative example; I never saw anyone who wanted to be a vampire more. I slipped him a silver dollar earlier—one I had charged as a protective talisman.' He dragged a ponderous Victorian chair over to the table where Bray was nursing his whiskey, staring abstractedly out the parted drapes to the courtyard below.

He saw three men in black, herding an enormous footlocker into the lobby. "You mean like a witchcraft amulet?" Bray said, sipping.

"Amulets are no good if they're not in your possession," said Angus. "This was a talisman, charged according to the original text of a grimoire called the *Liber Daemonorum*, published in Paris by Protassus in 1328. I have a copy."

"And the clerk?"

"I thought he was going to burst at the seams. If not for the gloves he had on, I think the talisman would've burned right through his open hand to the floor. Don't kid yourself about the intent some people have for this power. It's backed up like sewage on the other side of the veil, and a lot of evil could be done just by tapping into it." He killed his glass and motioned for Bray to refill it.

"Why expose yourself to something like that?" said Bray, now concerned. "Surely you've had a bellyful of baring your psyche to the tempest—or can you build some kind of tolerance?"

"To a degree, yes. It's still an ordeal, a mental and physical drain. But I can stand, where others would bend." Angus leaned closer; spoke confidentially: "You've missed a more obvious reason for doing so."

"Nicholas?" said Bray finally. "Vengeance?"

Angus swallowed another firebolt of liquor. "Not as an eye-for-an-eye thing. Nicholas' death convinced me that the phenomenon itself must be interrupted. Each outburst is more powerful. Each comes closer on the heels of the last. It is as though it is creating a bigger and bigger space in our reality, in which to exist. The 'valve' must be closed before the continuous escalation makes preventive action impossible."

"By god!" said Bray, his eyes lighting up. "The talisman!"

"I hope that wasn't too ostentatious—announcing my presence in the Hermitage with that stunt. As far as the rest of the congregation here is concerned, I'm just another acolyte."

"I haven't seen too many people since I arrived."

"Well, they'd shun the daylight by nature, anyway," said Angus. "Or what passes for daylight around here." He let his eyes drift into infinity focus, regarding the courtyard below. "You know, the Hermitage is quite an achievement, for what it is. The power I spoke of, the *mana*, and evil itself are two different things—but not mutually exclusive. It is evil that keeps the sunlight from this place; makes dead trees root in dead ground. Tonight's surge is a big one. Something evil couldn't hope for a more

custom-made womb. Maybe that surge of power is to fuel a birth tonight. Or a special death..."

"I don't even want to think about that possibility," said Bray.

"I must." Angus dumped one of his satchels onto the bed. "During that 1:30 juncture tonight, I must try to put a bogey in the paranormal plumbing."

"How?" said Bray, now visibly unnerved and looking about fruitlessly for a clock. "How does one stop that much power, barrelling right at you?"

"One doesn't. You turn it against itself, like holding a mirror up to a gorgon's face. It takes, in this special case, not only protective talismans against the sheer forces themselves, but also my anti-belief in the various physical manifestations—the monsters. The power will exhaust itself through an infinite echo effect, crashing back and forth like a violently bounding ball inside a tiny box." He drained his glass again. "In theory, that is."

"Plausible," said Bray. "But then, you're the expert on this sort of thing. I suppose we'll see the truth early this morning..."

"Not!" Angus' face flushed with sudden panic. "You must leave this place, before..."

"Leave you here alone, to fight such a fight alone? I admit that two old men may not present much of a threat to the powers you describe, but where in hell am I to go, knowing that such things transpire?" Bray's hand grew white-knuckled around his glass.

"Your own dormant fears might destroy you," said Angus, levelly. "Another death on my conscience."

"What am I to do, then?" Bray stiffened. "You may not believe in revenge, but I do. I insist! I side with you or I am less than a man... and that is my final word on the matter, sir." As punctuation, he finished his *haphroaig*.

The expression on Angus' face was neutrally sober, but within, he was smiling.

Midnight should have been anticlimactic. It was not.

In the funeral quiet of the lobby, an ebony clock boomed out twelve brass tones that resounded throughout the hotel like strikes on a huge dinner gong. A straggler, dressed in tatters, fell to the wire-net carpeting in convulsions, thrashing madly about. The stalwart desk clerk had watched the man inscribe three sizes on his forehead earlier, using hot ashes from the lobby fireplace. The ornamental andirons hissed their pleasure, hotly.

An almost subaural dirge, like a deep, constant synthesizer note, emanated from the ground floor and gradually possessed the entire structure. A chilling undercurrent of voices seemed to seep upward through the building's pipework and the hidden, dead spaces between walls.

In the Grand Ballroom, the chandeliers began to move by themselves. Below their ghostly tinkling, a quartet of figures in hooded tabards raised their arms in supplication. Candles of sheep tallow were ignited. Mass was enjoined.

Somewhere near the top of the hotel, someone screamed for nearly a whole minute. Uncarthy, low-

ering noises issued from the grounds, now heavily misted in nightfog. There were the sounds of strange beasts in pain, and vague echoes of something large and massy, moving sluggishly, as though trapped in a tar pit. It was starlessly dark outside.

"Are you positive you wish to stay?" said Angus, opening the flask of arrack. The Laphroaig was long gone.

"Yes. Just pour me another glass, please." Each new, alien sound made Bray wince a little, inside the folds of his coat, but he maintained bravely.

From within his shirt, Angus fished out a key on a thin chain of silver links. He twiddled it in each of his satchel's two locks. The first thing he produced from the case was a book lashed together with stained violet ribbons.

"Good god," choked Bray. "Is that the —"

The *Liber Daemonorum*. Pity this must be destroyed tonight. By burning. Damn shame. This is a collector's item." He heaved the volume onto the bed and the rank smell of foxed and mildewed age-old paper washed toward Bray. Brittle pieces of the ragged hide binding flaked to the floor.

Nearby, probably in the hall outside 724, someone howled like a dog until his voice gave out with an adenoidal squeak.

Bray's attention was drawn from the ancient witchcraft tome to the disk of burnished gold Angus removed from the satchel. It was an unbroken ring, big as a salad plate, with freecast template characters clinging to its inner borders. It caught the feeble light in the room and threw it around in sharp flashes.

"Gold?" said Bray, awestruck.

"Solid, refined 24K, pure to the fifth decimal point," said Angus, tossing it to the bed. The heavy chain necklace attached to it jingled; the disk bounced a hard crescent of light off the ceiling directly above. "The purity of the metal used in the talisman has protective value. I won't put it on until a few seconds before deadline — keep it as potent as possible, you understand."

From the satchel came more protective fetishes, mojo bags of donkey teeth, copper thread and travertine, hex stones with glyptic symbols, inked spells on parchment bound with hide tongues, tiny corked vials of opaque liquids. Angus tucked these into his clothing.

Something thumped heavily and repeatedly on the floor above them. Drum chants could be faintly heard.

"Any doubts now about there not being a full house here tonight?" said Angus. Bray's hand quivered in betrayal as he drank. Angus regretted that the academic portion of his mind regarded Bray simply as a handicap; his sense of honor could not refuse the older man. He hoped he would survive what was to follow, but would allow no compromising of his own task. Silence hung between them awhile longer.

"Does it matter where we are when it hits?"

"No. This hotel is the place. The psychos surrounding us are like the creepy trappings — more supernatural furniture. Pay them no heed. What we're dealing with has no form. You can be tricked by illusions; if you even consider for a second that something monstrous before your eyes might possibly be real, you're lost — you must remember that. The demon Nicholas saw was not real, until he thought it might be, making him afraid. Then it ate him up."

"Angus!" Bray stood from his chair. "I can — I can feel something strange . . . palpable, a swelling . . . like a balloon about to burst . . ." He looked around, agitated now.

Angus hauled out his railroad watch. "1:27 am. I set this by the time service in Willoughby late yesterday. Hmm — I suppose no time service is strictly accurate." He slipped quickly into the talisman.

"It's really coming," said Bray in shaky disbelief.

"Exactly like the atmospheric buildup Nicholas sensed, before the squirt at his house," said Angus. "I have no extra white power objects, friend Bray. You'll have to stick close behind me. That's about the only aid I can offer you. And something else —" He hurriedly dug a dented tin of Ronson lighter fluid out of the satchel and doused the *Liber Daemonorum*. The pungent liquid soaked slowly into the comforter on the bed and saturated the book of sorcery. Angus then came up with several disposable plastic cigarette lighters, each gimmicked with electrical tape. "Take one of these, and listen to me: During the confrontation, I may become momentarily transfixed. If that happens, I want you to light the book. It must be burned during the interface if my other, lesser shielding spells are to function. The lighter is modified to produce a long jet of flame when you thumb the wheel. Understand that the book is rare, and dangerous, and the supplicants booked into this place would gladly murder us to get it. If I hesitate, destroy it!"

Bray clutched the lighter tightly, like a crucifix against a vampire.

As though in the grip of an earthquake tremor, the Hermitage shuddered. A chunk of the whorled plaster ceiling disengaged, and smashed into chalky crumbles at Angus' feet.

"Remember, Bray!" he shouted. "It's not real —"

The rest of his words were obliterated by a thunderclap concussion of moving air as the oak door to 724 blew off its hinges and slapped the floor like a huge, wooden playing card. The French windows past Bray splintered outward in a shrieking hail of needlelike glass bits. The bottles and rickrack on the table scattered toward the window. The Laphroaig flask pegged Bray's temple and brought blood. The vacuum force of the moving air seemed to suck the breath from him. He screamed Angus' name, soundlessly.

Angus labored toward the door, walking ponderously, like a trapper in a snowbank, one hand holding the outthrust talisman, the other readying the lighter for the *Liber Daemonorum* crooked against his chest. Outside, the corridor was awash in stunning yellow light. A high-frequency keen knifed into his ears and numbed his brain. He heard his name being called over and over, coupled with a maniacal laugh that kept shifting speeds, accelerating and slowing, a warped record in the hands of a lunatic disk jockey. Through the shimmer and glare Angus thought he could see stunted, writhing shapes—varus monsters struggling to be born of his mind. He stared them down and one by one they were absorbed back into the light that produced them, dissolving as though beaten progressively thinner with a mallet until the light shone through, and disintegrated them. The talisman began to radiate heat against his chest. The first echo had been achieved.

The maniac sounds were definitely caused by something in terrific pain, fighting him. In the hallway mirror, Angus saw himself vaporize—hair popping aflame, shearing away, skin peeling back as though sandblasted off, skull rushing backward in a cloud of sugary powder, blood and brains vanishing in a quick cloud of color and stink.

It was an illusion, and he ignored it.

He tried to ignore the dim, background sound of Bray's screaming.

A gray lizard demon, scales caked in glistening slime, breached the outside window to 724 and pounced on Bray's back, ripping and tearing. More rushed in like a floodtide, their alligator snouts rending his clothing, their flying spittle frying through his skin like brown acid. Curved black talons laid open his chest and they began to devour him organ by organ. His lighter went spinning uselessly across the floor.

Angus caught a glimpse of the carnage taking place behind him. Bray was lost.

Angus stopped his advance. Bray was dead.

Bray was dead, and the typhoon of yellow force petered to nothingness in a second. Standing ridiculously alone in the quiet of the cathedral-like hallway, Angus realized, with a plummeting kind of bright, orange horror in his stomach, that he had lost.

He looked up and down the hallway. Nothing.

Then, distant, indecipherable sounds. Hungry sounds.

The book! *The book!* his mind screamed. His thumb automatically worked the lighter, and a jet of blue propane fire at least half a foot long spurted up, caressing the *Liber Daemonorum*. It billowed into flame along with his soaked coat-sleeve.

But the two iron gargoyles from the lobby were already winging toward Angus with metal-muscle strokes. He heard the grating of their black, iron flesh pumping, and looked up to see their diamond eyes fix on him. They peeled to either side of him as the book touched off; one swooped past in a blur, hooking the book away to smother it against its bellows chest, the other jackknifing upward in midair to strafe Angus. He felt cold, sharp pain. His feet left the floor and he crashed onto his back, rolling clumsily, blood daubing into one eye from the gashes the gargoyle's iron, butcher-cleaver claws had carved in his forehead.

His name was still being called, fast and slow and fast and—

"Angus" The tone was first disapproving, then pitying. "Angus, you poor old sod."

Turquoise Bray stood over him holding the still-smoking *Liber Daemonorum*. The violet ribbons were charred.

The iron gargoyles circled high in the corridor, lighting behind Bray. They cringed and fidgeted, like greyhounds, grinding their javelin teeth and snorting mist through their cast-iron nostrils with impatience.

"Since you've delivered this book to us," said Bray, "I think you're owed a few words." His hands slithered proudly around the tome and his chromium eyes glittered at Angus.

"The gargoyles—" Angus gasped from the floor.

"Oh, yes, they're real enough. They're a bit piqued because I haven't given you to them yet." Angus could see that Bray spoke around a mouthful of needed fangs like the dental-work of a rattlesnake. "Your disbelief in monsters posed an intriguing problem. How to chink such metal armor? How to trick *you*, the expert on all the tricks? You wouldn't believe in the patently unreal, so we made you believe in something else you'd accept with less question. The gargoyles are now real, thanks to your mind. Turquoise Bray, however, died in 1974. On Valentine's Day." The Braything, its hair gone jet-black, eyes sunken to mad ball bearings in seductive, dark pits, grinned wolfishly.

"Impossible!" Breathing was becoming difficult for Angus, as though his lungs were filling with hot candle wax. "Impossible . . . the power burst . . . you existed before the interface took place . . ."

"My dear Angus," the creature rasped in a phlegmatic voice, "you're not paying attention. This power burst was the biggest of all so far. People are more superstitious than ever. They go right on stacking it up. This surge was preceded by what young Nicholas characterized as a 'squirt', a considerable leakage that primed the paranormal pump, you might say." It pretended to inspect its elongated, spiked nails. "How do you think something as melodramatic as the Hermitage got here in the first place? It came out of your mind. It was what *you* expected; know-nothing cultists and pop Satanists and horror-movie props—supernatural furniture. It



was *all* an illusion, as was I. But it's real now. The *Liber Daemonorum* will help to keep our family corporeal."

Two shuffling corpses battered down the stairway door leading into the hallway. Their sightless, maggoty eye-sockets sought Angus' prone form. They made for him with inexorable slowness, rotting flesh dropping off their frames in clots. They hungered.

"Your H.P. Lovecraft might be pleased to know that his Old Ones are finally coming home," growled the monster. It stretched cavernously, bursting from its human clothes, revealing a wide body of insectile armor plating with double-jointed birdlike legs whose hooked toes gathered the carpet up in bunches. "It's all quite real now, friend Angus." The steely, silver eyes transfixed Angus from a nine-foot height. "As are my other friends. Here. Now."

The gargoyles jumped into the air and hovered like carrion birds. From 724 the reptilian scavengers continued to swarm, champing their oversized jaws, streamers of drool webbing the carpeting. Beyond the steaming, toothy thing that had been Bray, Angus saw a translucent horde of ghostly, humanoid leeches. The scuttling things advanced, worrying their bloodless, watchmaker's claws together in anticipation of a dark, burgundy-hued snack.

He recognized them now, all of the monsters, all of his lifetime's research into the occult, echoing back upon him. If he could be made to believe Bray had been real, then anything could follow . . . Zaebos, a demon with a human head and the body of a crocodile, entreated him from the end of the corridor. Near the ceiling floated the Keres, the Greek vampire entities who appear before death. Windigos—cannibalistic Indian ghosts—crowded past the living dead corpses to get to Angus' position. They licked their lips. Now Angus knew the name of the monster before him, the spirit who had assumed Bray's form to trick him. It was the Master of Ceremonies to the Infernal Court.

"*Ferdelet!*" he croaked, holding the talisman forward. "Swallow this!"

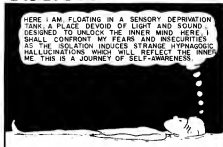
"Now, now," the demon said. "Too late for that hocus-pocus, Angus. You *believe* now." It waved an ebony claw carelessly, and the talisman melted, sizzling through Angus' clothing, scalding and eating into his chest with a geyser of golden steam.

He managed a howling scream.

"I have nothing but gratitude for you, friend Angus," Verdelet said. "Thanks to you, as of this night, the Hermitage is open for business."

The last thing Angus heard was the wet sound of jaws, opening. ☆

## S.M.O.G.



## By Bruce David



# CHANGE OF HEART

By

Robert Bloch

It had been the sun, the moon, the stars to me—a whirling planet of silver, held to its orbit by a glittering chain. Uncle Hansi would twirl it before my eyes on those long, faraway Sunday afternoons. Sometimes he let me press the icy surface against my ear, and then I heard from deep within it the music of the spheres.

Now it was only a battered old watch, a keepsake inheritance. The once gleaming case was worn and dented, and a deep scratch crossed the finely etched initials below the stem.

I took it to a jeweler's on the Avenue, for an estimate, and the clerk was frigidly polite. "We've hardly the facilities to handle such repair work here. Perhaps some small shop, a watchmaker of the old school—"

He laid it carelessly on the counter, for he did not know that this was a dying planet, a waning world, a star that flamed in first magnitude in the bygone eons of my childhood.

So I put the world in my pocket and went away from there. I walked home through the Village and came, eventually, to the establishment of Ulrich Klemm.

The basement window was grimy with the dust of years, and the gold lettering had flecked and moted, but the name caught my eye. "ULRICH KLEMM, WATCHMAKER."

I descended five steps, turned the doorknob, and walked into a seething symphony of sound. Whispers, murmurs, frantic titterings. Deep buzzings and shrill cadences. Muted, measured, mechanical rhythms, set in eternal order—the testament of Time.

Against shadowed walls the faces loomed and leered. They were big, they were small, they were round or oval or broad; high and low they hung, these clock-faces in the shop of Ulrich Klemm, ticking and staring at me in darkness.

The white head of the watchmaker was haloed in the light of his workbench. He turned and rose, then shuffled over to the counter, his padding feet weaving in counterpoint to the rhythms of the clockwork on the walls.

"There is something?" he asked. I stared into his face—the face of a grandfather's clock; weathered, patient, enduring, inscrutable.

"I want you to have a look at this," I said. "My uncle Hansi willed it to me, but the regular jewelers don't seem to know how to put it in working order."

As I put Uncle Hansi's watch on the counter, the face of the grandfather's clock leaned forward. All of the faces on the wall gazed and gaped while I explained.

Ulrich Klemm nodded. His gnarled hands (do all grandfather's clocks have gnarled hands? I wondered) carried the battered old timepiece over to the light above the workbench.

I watched the hands. They did not tremble. The fingers suddenly became instruments. They opened, revealed, pried, probed, delicately dissected.

"Yes. I can repair this, I think." He spoke to me, to all the faces on the wall.

"It will not be easy. These parts—they are no longer made. I shall have to fashion them especially. But it is a fine watch, yes, and worth the effort."

I opened my mouth, but did not speak. The faces on the wall spoke for me.

For suddenly the sound surged to a crescendo, sharp and shrill. The faces laughed and gurgled and shrieked; a hundred voices, accents, tongues and intonations met and mingled. Six times the voices rose and fell, proclaiming—

"It's six o'clock, Grandfather."

No, it wasn't my imagination. The voice said that. Not the mechanical voice, but the other one. The one that came from the long, slim, incredibly white throat of the girl who emerged from the rear of the shop.

"Yes, Lisa?" The old man cocked his head.

"Dinner is ready. Oh. Excuse me—I thought you were alone."

I stared at golden hair and silver flesh. Lisa. The granddaughter. The clocks ticked on, and something leapt in rhythm deep in my chest.

She smiled. I smiled. Ulrich introduced her. And I became crafty, persuasive. I leaned over the counter and artfully led the conversation along, encouraging him to talk of the marvels of clockwork, of old days in Switzerland when Ulrich Klemm was a horologist of renown.

It wasn't difficult. He extended an invitation to share the meal, and soon I was in one of the rooms behind the shop, listening to further reminiscences.

He spoke of the golden days of clockwork, of automata—mechanical chessplayers, birds that sang and flew, soldiers walking and sounding trumpets, angels in belfries chorusing the coming of day and brandishing swords against Evil.



Ulrich Klemm showed me the picture on his wall—the picture he had salvaged ten years ago when he and Lisa fled from Europe to the refuge of this tiny shop in the Village. The picture was a landscape, with railroad tracks running through a mountain pass. He wound a spring at the side of the frame and the train came out and raced through a tunnel, climbed the grade and disappeared again.

But no picture, however animated, could satisfy me as did the sight of Lisa. And while my tongue responded to the old man, my eyes answered the girl.

We didn't say much to one another. She cut her finger while serving the meat, and I bandaged it as the blood flowed. We spoke of the weather, of trivial things. But when I departed I had wrung an invitation to come again from Ulrich Klemm. Lisa smiled and nodded as I left, and she smiled and nodded again that night in my dreams.

So it was that I came often to the little shop, even after my watch had been repaired and restored to me. Ulrich Klemm enjoyed an audience—he dreamed and boasted before me for long hours. He told me of the things he had created in the old country; of royal commissions, mechanical marvels, and medals and awards.

"There is nothing I cannot fathom once I turn my hand to it," he often said. "All Nature—just a mechanism. When I was a young man, my father wished for me to become a surgeon. But the human body is a poor instrument, full of flaws. A good chronometer, that is perfection."

I listened and nodded and waited. And in time, I achieved my goal.

Lisa and I became friends, bit by bit. We smiled, we spoke, we went walking together. We went to the park, to the theatre.

It was simple, once the initial barriers were surmounted. For Lisa had no friends, and her school-days were an alien memory. Ulrich Klemm treasured her with morbid jealousy. She and she alone had never failed him; she responded perfectly to his will. That is what the old man desired—he loved automations.

But I loved Lisa. Lisa the girl, Lisa the woman, I dreamed of an awakening, an emergence into the world beyond the four walls of the shop. And in time I spoke to her of what I planned.

"No, Dane," she said. "He will never let me go. He

is old and all alone. If we can wait, in a few years —  
“Wake up,” I said. “This is New York, the twentieth century. You’re of age. And I want you to marry me. Now.”

“No,” she sighed. “We cannot do this to him.” And shook her head, like an automaton.

It was like something out of the Dark Ages. It was a world apart from my office uptown, with its talk of surveys and projects and a branch managership opening for me in Detroit.

I told her about the Detroit assignment. I insisted on speaking now. Lisa wept then, and Lisa pleaded, but in the end I went to the old man and told him.

“I’m going to marry Lisa,” I said. “I’m going to take her with me. Now.”

“No-no-no-no,” ticked the clocks on the wall. “NO — NO — NO,” boomed the chimes. And, “You cannot take her!” shouted Ulrich Klemm. “She is all I have left. No one will ever take her from me. Never.”

It was useless to argue. And when I pleaded with Lisa to elope, to run away, she turned the blank perfection of a clock-face towards me and ticked, “No.” For Lisa was the old man’s masterpiece. He had spent years perfecting her pattern of obedient reaction. I saw that I could never tamper with Ulrich Klemm’s delicate adjustments.

So I went away, carrying my silver watch on a chain in my pocket; knowing that I could never find a chain that would link Lisa to me. During the months in Detroit I wrote frequently to the shop, but there was no answer.

I instructed a friend of mine to stop by and deliver messages, but I heard no word. The silver watch in my pocket ticked off the days and the weeks and the months, and finally I returned to New York.

Then I heard that Lisa was dead.

My friend had stopped by and found the shop shuttered and deserted. Going around to the rear, he roused Ulrich Klemm from his vigil. The haggard, sleepless old man said that Lisa had suffered a heart attack. She was dying.

Returning several days later, my friend was unable to rouse anyone. But the wretch on the door of the locked shop told its own grim story.

I thanked my informant, sighed, nodded, and went out into the wintry streets.

It was a bitterly cold day. My breath plumed before me, and I stamped the snow from my shoes as I descended the steps to Ulrich Klemm’s door. The glass frosted like a wedding-cake; I could not see into the shop through the sheet of ice.

My gloved hand tugged the doorknob. The door rattled, but did not open. I knocked. The old man was a little deaf, yet he must hear, he must answer. I knocked again.

Quite suddenly the door opened. I stepped over the threshold into a vacuum of darkness and silence. No light shone over the workbench, no chimes her-

alded my entrance. And the clockfaces were invisible, inaudible. The absence of the familiar ticking struck me like a physical blow. It was as though a world had ended.

Everything has stopped. And yet Ulrich Klemm’s crazed fanaticism would not permit a stopping, an ending —

“Klemm!” I shouted. “Ulrich Klemm!”

Something stirred in the darkness before me. I heard the tread of light, hesitant footsteps.

“Klemm,” I said. “Turn on the lights. It’s Dane.”

Then I heard the voice, the soft voice murmuring up at me. “You’ve come back. Oh, I knew you would come back.”

“Lisa!”

“Lisa!”

“Yes, dearest. I have been waiting for you here, all alone. So long it has been, I do not know — ever since he died.”

“He died? Your grandfather?”

“Did you not know? I was ill, very ill. My heart, the doctor said. It was I who should have died, but Grandfather would not hear of it. He said the doctor was a fool, he would save me himself. And he did. Yes he did. He nursed and took care of me, even after I was in a coma.

“Then, when at last I was awake again, Grandfather failed. He was so old, you know. Caring for me without thought of himself — going without food or rest — it weakened him. Pneumonia set in and I could do nothing. He died here in the shop. That was a long time ago, it seems.”

“How long?”

“I cannot remember. I have not eaten or slept since, but then there is no need, I knew you would come —”

“Let me look at you.” I groped through the darkness, found the switch for the lamp over the workbench. The halo of light blossomed against the silent clockfaces on the walls.

Lisa stood there quietly, her face white and waxen, her eyes blank and empty, her body wasted. But she lived. That was enough for me. She lived, and she was free forever of the old man’s tyranny.

I wondered what he had done to save her, he who had boasted that nothing would ever take her away from him. Well, he had lavished the last of his skill and genius upon preserving her from death, and it was enough.

I sighed and took Lisa in my arms. Her flesh was cold against mine, and I strove to melt the icy numbness against the heat of my body. I bent my head against her breast, listened to the beating of her heart.

Then I turned and ran screaming from that shop of shadows and silence.

But not before I heard the hellish sound from Lisa’s breast — that sound which was not a heartbeat, but a faint, unmistakable ticking. ☆

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## THE NINETY-NINTH CUBICLE

By

R. A. Lafferty

Simpson Coldturkey owned three little buildings in a row in the 900 block of West Dudley Street. If he had only one of them rented, he was on the edge of starvation. If he had two of them rented, he was at the break-even point. And if (as it seldom happened) he had all three of them rented, he was rich, but just barely. Now, for a while at least, he was just barely rich, for he had rented his third building to new tenants, had collected three months' rent for it in advance; and the tenants were moving in right now. This third building was the one furthest west, on the corner of Dudley Street and South Random Road, the largest of the buildings. He sometimes rented it for an arcade. It was the place above which Simpson had his own living quarters, in that cockeyed, foreshortened second story.

The name of the business of the new tenants was *Mood Manipulators Unlimited*. They had already hung the sign that said 'Do Business with us and be Moody all the Time'.

"I hadn't better inquire too closely as to the true nature of their business," Simpson told himself. "Every time I do that, I turn up with another empty building."

The new tenants seemed to be flamboyant but pleasant young people most of the time (their names were Jane Casual, Avram Sundog, and Harold Grunion), but now and then they showed aberrant moodiness themselves. Their stock in trade was a hundred or so cubicles (about the size of telephone booths), about the size to hold a person standing or sitting.

Their sales literature had such pitches as 'Try our blue-bird blue: be happy as a blue-bird' or 'Have a go at our rotten-red: there is no fun like getting red-headed mad' or 'Use our copperhead-copper special: terrify your friends: be venomous'.

"How does your mood manipulator work?" Simpson asked the tenant Harold Grunion.

"We use atomized, ionized particles of fractured sunlight of certain colors trapped in droplets of glycerine-ice, droplets about a hundredth of a millimeter in diameter. The resonance of the trapped, minute color comes through as a mood, always one mood selected out of a whole orchestra of moods."

"It sounds a little bit like pseudo-science to me," Simpson Coldturkey said.

"Yes, doesn't it!" the tenant Harold Grunion agreed. "But it works. Try it and see."

"Are you people dope-peddlers?" Simpson asked tenant Jane Casual. "I realize that it's illegal to discriminate against dope-peddlers in renting, but I was just wondering."

"Call us the Poor Peoples' Dope-Peddlers," Jane Casual said. "We escrow (is that the right word?) all chemical or organic dope. It has priced itself out of the market. But our angstrom-effect dope (it sets up counterpoints between the angstrom wave-lengths of the various colors and the wave-lengths of the various mood-frequencies in people) is almost as cheap as sunlight, and that is exactly what it is composed of. And it will effect every possible mood to every possible intensity."

"That's almost an infinite number of effects," Simpson Coldturkey said.

"Well, I exaggerate. It will effect ninety-nine different moods in nine intensities each. Ah, we are going to reduce even that a little bit now, by one ninety-ninth as a matter of fact. The ninety-ninth mood is a little bit too dangerous."

"That sounds like a crock of offal," Simpson said doubtfully.

"Try it and see," tenant Jane Casual told him. "The ninety-ninth mood, the Garish Orange Mood, is entirely too dangerous. And I want to ask you a favor about that. I wonder whether, while my two partners are out, I might store the Garish Orange Cubicle itself somewhere up in that cockeyed foreshortened second story where you live. And I want you to swear that you will never tell either of my partners, nor anybody at all, that you have it, that you have ever heard of it. And I will put myself into deep forgetfulness of the matter when it is done."

"All right," said Simpson Coldturkey.

The *Mood Manipulators Unlimited* had such cubicles as 'Green-Eyed-Monster Green, the Envious-Mood Color' and 'Passion Purple Number Twenty-Seven: you only think you've been aroused before'.

"They sound a little bit nutty," Simpson told tenant Avram Sundog.

"Try them and see," Avram said. "In particular try out 'Nutty-Brown: Meet the Squirrel inside yourself'. That's a good mood to get started on, Mr. Coldturkey. Oh, I'd like to ask a favor of you."

"We've decided to withdraw our ninety-ninth mood cubicle, Garish Orange. We were tired of hav-



ing to skip out of town because of it. Jane Casual has had it put in a place unknown to either Harold Grunion or myself. The place is also unknown to Jane Casual now. We supreme masters of moods have a trick of forgetting things, burying the memory of them so deeply that it can only be retrieved by triple hypnosis (with three different practitioners from three different continents). But even if a person should find the Garish Orange Cubicle, he wouldn't be able to use it. It takes two keys. One of them is in the custody of Harold Grunion and the other one is in my custody. Here is my key. Keep it and never even think of it again. And I will perform

deep amnesia and forget completely what I have done with it."

"All right," Simpson Coldturkey said.

Simpson began to try the cubicles a little bit. He started with 'Gandy-Dancer Gray: the Mood that makes Mousy People quit feeling Dull' and it worked. He tried the 'Gaudy Green Cubicle: it's fun to be the Damnest Show-off in the Universe', and it was fun. He tried the 'Lurking Lavender Cubicle: all the Sneaky Pleasures of Sneakery', and he reveled in being a sneak. He tried the 'Faithful Cerulean Cubicle: Experience True Love Forever, for an hour', and he

did indeed experience true love forever for an hour.

I wonder whether you would do me a favor, Mr. Coldturkey?" Harold Grunion asked Simpson. "We have decided to retire our most controversial cubicle, the Garish Orange Mood Cubicle. Jane Casual has placed the cubicle itself in the most unlikely place she could think of, and has put herself into deep amnesia about the matter so that only under triple hypnosis would she be able to recall the place. And there is nothing more bothersome or more expensive than triple hypnosis. Avram Sundog has delivered his key to the cubicle to the most unlikely person he could think of, and has likewise put himself into deep amnesia about the matter. Here is the other key to the cubicle (it takes two keys to put the cubicle into operation). I want you to take it, and more or less forget that you have it. Never mention it to anybody, never even think about it. And I myself will be in total forgetfulness about it."

"All right," said Simpson Coldturkey.

"Why don't you try our 'Ogres Orange Mood Cubicle', Mr. Coldturkey," Jane Casual said to landlord Simpson one day. "It has the motto 'Turn into a real Ogre: Kill People, Kill People!' You are a meek man, but every meek man has a tiger or an ogre penned up in his heart. It will be so much fun for you to release your 'Beast Within'."

"I suspect that in my case the tiger or ogre would be a meek tiger or ogre also," Simpson said.

"Maybe not. Our mood cubicles work magic. Try it, try it."

Then Jane Casual went to let out a customer who had just taken advantage of the 'Generosity Green Cubicle: Release the Wonderful, Free-Handed Person inside Yourself'. The use of the Generosity Green Cubicle was always free of charge, but it always put the customer into such a generous state of mind that he often insisted on paying double or triple the amount of his outstanding bill.

Simpson Coldturkey tried the 'Basking Brown Cubicle: Laziness as a Luxury Experience' and he liked it. He tried the 'Sadistic Saffron Cubicle' and he began to suffer a monstrous and exciting change of personality. Then he entered the 'Ogres Orange Cubicle' and he turned into an ogre. He killed people, killed people, several of them. "This is the most exciting thing that ever happened to me," he squealed with delight. "For this I was born. Oh, the tall, steep pleasure of it!"

He went on a rampage. He killed four people. Then he went to his living quarters and slept the clock around.

When he woke again, the horrifying pleasure still held him in its grip.

"It was wonderful, wonderful," he overflowed to Jane Casual. "I feel that my life is almost complete now. Now I will just go to the police and confess to the police for the murders, and then I will be punished: that will be the final aspect of the high pleasure."

"You just plain stay away from the police, Mr. Coldturkey," Jane Casual told him. "Are you a dummy or something? You'd better go in and relax in the 'Pink Panther Cubicle' or in the old faithful 'Blue-Bird Blue Cubicle: be Happy as a Blue-Bird.'"

"But I'm already as happy as a tiger or a bloody ogre or a fulfilled murderer. Why would I want to go back to the weak stuff?"

"Oh, Mr. Coldturkey, all the people that you kill in the 'Ogres Orange Mood Cubicle' are simulated people, not real. We get them from 'True Simulations Industries'. They're cheaper than you'd think. 'True Simulations Industries' gathers them up again, and with no more than minor overhauls they are ready to be used again. The police would think you were crazy if you reported killing simulations."

"Oh no, that broke the bubble, Jane Casual!" Simpson Coldturkey cried out. "That let me down all the way. I wanted them to be real. I knew they were real. *I have to have them be real!* Isn't there a Manipulated Mood Cubicle where one kills real people?"

"No. There used to be one, but now it's unobtainable. We've discontinued it. It was the 'Garish Orange Cubicle', the controversial ninety-ninth cubicle. Oh yes, it would put people into such a wild and bloody and wonderful ecstasy that they were able to rush right out and kill real people, lots of them. And the cubicle abetted them in it, arranged the weapons and all the wonderful encounters."

"*That's* what I want to experience! *That's* what I want now! Real live mass murders, the Tiger and the Ogre in me released! It will put the cap-stone on my life."

"No. It's impossible, Mr. Coldturkey," Jane Casual said. "That's been withdrawn. Go in and try the 'Kelly Green Cubicle' or the 'Euphoric Yellow Cubicle' or the 'Magic Magenta Cubicle'. You have no idea how many wonderful moods there are that you can enjoy."

"No, no, Jane Casual. My whole life is in ashes if I can't have the real thing."

Simpson Coldturkey started up the cockeyed stairs to that cockeyed, foreshortened second story where he lived. He dragged himself upward with sad steps. Then suddenly his steps became more animated. A wave of garish orange swept over him. He saw the whole world with garish orange eyes now.

"I have it all!" he cried. "I can put it all together in a moment!" He got the Sundog key from one hiding place, the Grunion key from another hiding place, and he keyed the 'Garish Orange Mood Cubicle' that Jane Casual had stored there. And the cubicle leapt into action.

With the 'Garish Orange Mood Cubicle' one could go into the wonderful, tigerish, ogreish, bloody mood, and the cubicle would furnish the weapons and arrange all the wonderful encounters. One could go right out and kill real people and have the absolutely life-capping pleasure.

If one could get out. ☆



# Weirdisms

No matter how extensive the research which has been done on the sleeping human mind, no physiologist or psychologist has ever been able to determine the true purpose of dreaming.

Dr. Nathaniel Kleitman, former professor of neurophysiology at the University of Chicago's medical school was working with then graduate student William Dement on projects which lead to the discovery of the different phases of sleep. Kleitman and Dement discovered that the average human enters a stage of sleep every 90 minutes during which dreams occur. The two labeled this stage of sleep, R.E.M. (rapid eye movement) as a result of the way the eyes of a sleeping individual seem to watch, or track the action in a dream. But neither Kleitman or Dement, or any other succeeding physiologist have been able to explain the process of some of the best documented and most bizarre dreams of a precognitive nature. There are over three thousand which the *Weirdisms* department of *Weird Tales* has on file; we're going to share just a small handful of some of the best known ones.

One of the best recorded incidents of a precognitive dream was that of President Abraham Lincoln, who dreamed about his own assassination some 14 days before he was shot in the Ford's Theatre by John Wilkes Booth. As Lincoln's personal diary disappeared mysteriously shortly after his death, the only surviving detailed account of the dream is one given by Lincoln's close friend, Ward Hill Lamont.

"About ten days ago I retired very late. . . . I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a deathlike stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered downstairs.

"There, the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room. No living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along. . . . I was puzzled and alarmed. . . . Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, I kept on until I arrived at the East Room. . . . There I met a sickening sur-

prise. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully.

"Who is dead in the White House?" I demanded of one of the soldiers. "The President," was his answer. "He was killed by an assassin."

John Williams, an English mining engineer and banker suffered from a strange dream in which the British Prime Minister of the day, Spencer Perceval was shot to death in the House of Commons. Williams had the dream three times during the evening of May 3, 1812 and although several prominent persons had been told about his strange dream, including several reporters, the detailed account that follows wasn't published in *The Times* until several days after the murder actually took place . . . exactly as Williams' dream had described it!

"Mr. Williams was in the House of Commons, where he saw a small man in a blue coat and white waistcoat. Then, as he watched, a man in a brown coat with metal buttons drew a pistol from his coat. He fired at the small man who fell, blood pouring from a wound a little below the left breast. Mr. Williams heard clearly the report of the pistol, saw blood fly out and stain the waistcoat, saw the color of the man's face change."

The assassin was seized, and when Williams, in his dream, asked who had been shot, he was told "the Chancellor."

One of the most remarkable of the bizarre dreams, and one of the most often retold in horror stories, is one which was told by the British Diplomat, Lord Dufferin. Dufferin was staying one night at a friend's country house in Ireland. He awakened suddenly with a feeling of unexplainable dread and fear, so to calm his nerves, he opened the window which overlooked a country garden. In the bright moonlight, he saw a man walking across the lawn carrying a large dark box on his back. The man Dufferin saw had a sad and very disfigured face, and it

became clear as the man came closer to the window that he was in fact carrying a coffin. The ugly man stopped—briefly to look up at Dufferin, and then disappeared into the darkness.

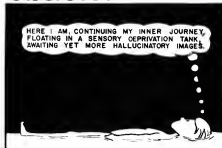
It wasn't until many years later when Dufferin was ambassador to Paris that he had opportunity to see the strange man again. He was in the lobby of a hotel where a great diplomatic gathering was taking place, waiting for the elevator. Suddenly the cage opened to let them onto the elevator, and Dufferin stopped short when he recognized the operator as the disfigured man he had seen walking through the country garden carrying the coffin many years earlier. Dufferin refused to enter the cage, and just moments after the elevator had begun to ascend to the meeting, the cable broke, and the elevator crashed into the building's basement killing many. Dufferin inquired with the hotel to find out the identity of the operator, but there was no information as he had been hired for that day only.

And what about the dreams of prominent writers

throughout history? For instance, Jonathan Swift wrote much of the detail in *Gulliver's Travels* from his dreams. The book was published in 1726, and in it, the famed astronomers of the mythical island of Laputa had discovered that the planet Mars had two moons, one of which travelled twice as fast as the other. In fact, it wasn't until 150 years later, in 1877, that the Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C., discovered that Mars had indeed two moons, one of which travelled twice as fast as the other.

Shortly after his book, *Look Homeward Angel* was released, American writer Thomas Wolfe finished a manuscript called, "K 19", which was about a pullman car numbered "K 19". It had been a dream fascination of his for many years. Although the book was never published as an individual work, Wolfe died in September of 1938, and when the author's body was placed on a train bound for his home in Asheville, North Carolina, how does one explain the coincidence of the pullman in which the coffin rode being numbered, "K 19"? ☆

## S.M.O.G.



## By Bruce David



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# COME TO THE BANK

By

Arch Oboler



She spoke to me, the gaunt-faced woman in white, and with her first words I knew that something was wrong—terribly wrong. And this was what she said:

Please—would you come to the bank with me? Please! I—I've asked so many people but they won't listen to me. You *will* come to the bank with me! No—don't turn your head—please, don't go away! Listen—if I tell you very carefully *why* I want you to come to the bank with me, you *will* come, won't you? . . . He's locked up in there! He can't get any air! . . . No, no, don't get excited! I didn't say he was locked up in the vault! All they've got in their vault is money—and I don't care about money, all I care about is *him*! . . . I—I didn't mean to tell you . . . all right, I did. Now you've *got* to come to the bank with me and help me! It's Fred Roth! He's in the bank and he can't get out! . . . What are you laughing about? That's not funny! I tell you he's in the bank and he can't get out! He's been in there for—I think it's three weeks! . . . Damn you! *Stop laughing!* . . . Please listen to me, I'll tell you all about it. From the start. I'm a school teacher. At the Mattson High School. I teach Physics. It's a rational science. Cause and effect—cause and effect—Mr. Roth teaches in the same school. Psychology. The way of the human mind. But that's not an exact science, is it? The human mind—not exact at all—and that started it! That's what started it! Mr. Roth said to me:

"Well, speaking quite frankly and candidly, Miss Moss—I don't think very much of your exact sciences."

"Two and two always add up to four, Mr. Roth," I told him.

"Not where the human mind is concerned."

"I don't understand."

"It is my profound conviction that the potential-

ties of the human mind—and body—have never been realized by any human creature."

"But there have been great men. Plato, Lincoln—so many scientists—"

"Yes," Mr. Roth said, "but only fractional greatness. Using perhaps one-tenth of the power latent within themselves! It's all a matter of concentration! Thomas Edison used perhaps one iota more concentration than the average man and became one of the great inventors of all time! I tell you, Miss Moss, if men would concentrate their minds to the limit, the universe would be theirs. . . ."

That's a very innocent start, isn't it? Just a teacher talking about the human mind. I thought nothing of it. Mr. Roth was such an intense young man! I—I like his intensity! . . .

"Just think what could happen," Mr. Roth told me, "if a man could bring his mind to the proper point of concentration! He could move objects with his mind—yes, why not! *Think* that a table should move—and it would move!"

I remember I smiled at him when he said that. Dear, intense Mr. Roth.

"*Think* that he wanted to be a certain place and he would *be* there!" Mr. Roth went on that day. "Men conceived this civilization just by a thought—and here it is! All is power of thought over matter—a man *thinks* a book before the book exists! He *thinks* a house, and only then the house can *be*! All is power of mind over matter!..."

I like to watch his eyes while he talked—they were so bright and burning, and—his mouth as he talked—the way it twisted—I couldn't help liking Mr. Roth, could I? We had dinner together once.... I remember the waiter....

"Will you have coffee with your dinner or later, sir?"

"Eh? What did you say?"

"The waiter wanted to know if you wanted coffee with your dinner, Mr. Roth."

"No—no coffee!"

"It's very nice of you to have dinner with me, Mr. Roth."

"On the contrary—I'm grateful to you. You are a good listener."

"Thank you."

"I've done a great deal of work in the weeks since I last talked to you."

"Have you? Please tell me."

"It isn't exactly work—it's more of a decision."

"Yes?"

"I have come to the decision to stop theorizing. Yes, I've decided to put what I believe into practice."

"I don't know what you mean."

"It's quite simple. The powers of concentration, Miss Moss—I've decided to put into practice my theory of concentration. I do not want to anticipate, but I expect wonderful results, Miss Moss—I might even say unbelievable results...."

Unbelievable results, that's what Mr. Roth said.... Must I tell you more? Please come with me to the bank!... All right, all right, I'll tell you the rest. The day after he talked to me in the restaurant, Mr. Roth didn't come to school. I know that because at lunch-time he wasn't in his usual place in the cafeteria, and when I asked, they told me that he had suddenly taken a leave of absence and that an extra teacher was taking over his classes. I was very disappointed. A week went by—two weeks—I decided to go see him. I took a few days off from my work. I found out his home number. Friday

morning I bought a new dress—a very becoming one—and then I went to visit Mr. Roth. I was certain he wouldn't be angry with me. It was perfectly proper that I call upon him—as a friend. I remember standing by the door of his room knocking. I suddenly realized that the door was ajar! No sound. I called his name. But he didn't answer. And yet the landlady had said he was at home! I pushed the door open further and glanced in.... I remember I said:

"Mr. Roth! Dead! Oh, no!"

"No—I'm alive...."

"Oh! I thought—Mr. Roth! Your face—the way you look—what—"

"Water—glass—"

"Yes! You *are* sick!"

"Not—sick—water—"

"Here—drink—I'll hold it! Doctor! I'll call a doctor!"

"No! Wait!"

"But you're ill—"

"Listen to me!.... I'm—not—sick...."

"Then what—"

"I—told—you...."

"I—I don't know—"

"I—have—been sitting here—for... a week...."

"Sitting... for a *week*?"

"Concentration.... Practicing concentration.... The experiment was most successful.... I have proven that I can do what some of the Orientals profess to do—slow down, through concerted will-power, the essential life processes.... A week without food and water—is that not a triumph, Miss Moss?"

"I—I don't know—Mr. Roth, why do you do these things?"

"I will try to explain it to you simply. Human thoughts are like the rays of the sun—spreading in all directions. By the use of a lens the rays of the sun can be focused on one point, and instead of warmth there is a focal point of intense light that can burn its way through all obstacles. And so it is with human thoughts—if, through concentration, a man could focus them on one point—he would be a god among men! I tell you, Miss Moss, that I am confident that I, through training, can become that one man in a million! Even as muscles can be trained—so am I training my mind! And the day when my training is complete—I will be able to anything I desire! You hear me—*anything*!"

When he said that, thin and weak and tired as he was, Mr. Roth's eyes looked at me and I was afraid. For him.... I made up my mind! Right then! I would get him away from that room—out among people—yes, out into the country! The first thing was to get him out of that room!... He ate—rested—and then went out with me....

"I—I don't see why I let you talk me into this, Miss Moss. I—I have so much work to do."

"This walk will do you good. . . ."

"But—where are we going?"

"Well, first, I want you to come to the bank with me."

"I beg your pardon."

"Well, you see, I—I've been thinking of taking a little vacation—and I need some money. Going to withdraw some. . . ."

"Oh—oh, I see."

"I—I, too, want to get off some place where I can concentrate."

"Oh, yes, yes, most important!"

"Yes. Have you thought about going out to the country, Mr. Roth?"

"The buildings, Miss Moss—look at them—steel and concrete—so firm, so solid, so enduring! Do you know something, Miss Moss—"

"You're walking so fast —"

"Once upon a time they were only an idea in man's mind — perhaps, even now they have no solidity, but are just ideas hanging in air through which a man with single-mindedness of purpose could walk as easily as if he were walking through air! Do you understand me, Miss Moss?"

"I—I'm not quite sure. The country would be a wonderful place to work, no wouldn't it, Mr. Roth?"

We went into the bank. He kept talking about the powers of concentration—I hardly listened to him—all I could think about was that somehow I had to get him into a new environment. The foyer of the building where the bank was. We went in. People—elevators—suddenly Mr. Roth stopped. He stared at the wall. I said:

"Mr. Roth! Mr. Roth, what are you looking at?"

"This—this is—the time!"

"Time? Time for what?"

"I told you!"

"What —"

"When my subconscious reached the proper point of incubation I would know!"

"Know?"

"That my powers had reached to the point where — I could do *anything*!"

"Mr. Roth—please—let us go —"

"Anything I tell you! This is the time! Now! I must make use of that power *now*!"

"No—please—what are you —"

"That marble wall—straight ahead—I say I can walk *through* it!"

"No—please—stop joking —"

"I will—I will walk through it!"

"No! Mr. Roth! Come back! Don't!"

I remember I screamed! The bank guard came running! I told him that he'd walked through the wall! Mr. Roth had walked through the wall!

You sit there smug and self-certain, don't you? It couldn't have happened—but listen, you pinhead mind, I tell you it did! I saw it with my own eyes! Mr. Roth walked right toward that marble wall and he went into it and then he was gone—do you hear me?—*gone*! . . .

But I mustn't call you names and make you angry, mustn't I, because you must come to the bank with me. Yes, yes, I'll tell you more of just what happened on that day. The bank guard said:

"Now look, lady—take it easy —"

"Get out of my way! The wall—he walked through the wall!"

"Lady, for Pete's sake—you'll start a riot—stop yelling! —"

"He said he'd do it—and he did do it—he walked through that wall! Listen everybody! He walked through that wall!"

"Lady, don't make a disturbance—lady —"

"Let go of me! Don't hold me back! I've got to get to him—Mr. Roth —"

"What's going on here? I'm the bank manager! What's this disturbance?"

"Well, this lady, all at once she screamed and now she —"

"Tell him to let go of me! Mr. Roth! He concentrated his mind and he said he'd walk through that wall! And he did!"

"Wha-at?"

"That's it, Mr. Searle! She keeps sayin' —"

"Tell him to let go of me! That wall—Mr. Roth went through that wall! I've got to —"

"My dear woman, are you out of your mind? Keep quiet! Stop making all that noise! That wall is solid—solid concrete faced with marble! You'd better go home and stop disturbing the peace! Show her to the door, Regan!"

So they put me out. . . . I stood in the street. . . . I didn't know what to do. . . . And then, I knew what I had to do! I would wait there until Mr. Roth came back. And he would come back. He had gone through the wall, and he must have come out the other side, and now he would walk around the building and come back and meet me there! So I waited. . . . A long time. . . . It began to rain. . . . I stood there in the rain. . . . Mr. Roth. . . . And then a terrible thought! What if he—I ran to the door of the bank building! It was locked! I began to beat on the door! . . .

"Let me in! Please! Let me in! Mr. Roth!"

"Hey! Lady! What—don't you know the bank's been closed for hours?"

"Oh! Mr. Policeman! I'm glad you're here! I've got to get in! I've got to!"

"Now take it easy. . . . hey, aren't you the one that's been standing out here? I've been watchin' you!"

"Let go of me! Mr. Roth's in there!"  
"Now, lady—"  
"I will get in!"  
"Hey! The door! Kickin' the door in! Are you nuts? Now you come along with me! Come on!"

I didn't get in to see Mr. Roth that night.  
No... They put me in a cell... Then a judge...

"Order in the court, order in the court! This prisoner will be held for further examination. Next case."

I tried to tell them—Mr. Roth—but no one would listen to me! All night, and the next terrible day—no one would listen... Then a doctor...

"Now tell me—do you have dreams, Miss Moss?... Do you think that people dislike you?... Have you often seen Mr. Roth or other people disappear?... When did you first begin to have these hallucinations?..."

Asking me questions—over and over—but when I tried to tell them about Mr. Roth, they started to say terrible things to me....

"The fact of the matter is, Mr. Roth *has* disappeared—it is the opinion of the police that he decamped with the woman's money—yes, took her money and ran off!"

I didn't care what they said! I had to get to the bank! You know why? Mr. Roth had started for the wall and I had seen him go through it and he hadn't come around to meet me! So, there was only one answer—*he was still in the wall!* And while Mr. Roth was in the wall they were keeping me in this hospital!

I had to get out! And *it did* get out! I broke a window—and then I was free in the street. Still raining—I ran along the dark streets until I was at the bank... Closed... There was a doorway—another building—I hid in the dark and waited all through the night until morning—until they opened the doors of the bank... I went in. I walked toward the wall—*that* wall... I wanted to run to it... but I walked... Then I was there—the very wall he'd gone into... At last, I stood close to it. Whispering...

"Mr. Roth... Mr. Roth, are you in there?... It's Miss Moss... Ada Moss... Mr. Roth, please—if you're in there—answer me! They'll see me standing here by this wall talking and they won't let me stand here! I'm crying, Mr. Roth, they'll see me crying, so please—I've got my ear close to the wall—if you're in there please answer me!"

And then I heard! Something—through the concrete—at first I didn't understand, but then I heard my name! Yes! My name! I was right! Mr. Roth was in the wall! He'd walked into the wall and stayed in there! I heard his words! Pleading words! I remember every one of them!

Miss Moss—Miss Moss—please get me out of here—please, Miss Moss—please Miss Moss!

Yes! Yes, I understand! I will get you out of there! Help, help! There's a man in the wall! Help me get him out! Mr. Roth! Do you hear? I'll get you help! Hurry, people! Bring axes, picks! There's a man in the wall! Mr. Roth! He's in the wall!

They put me back in the hospital... They didn't believe me... They didn't help Mr. Roth... I was very sick... I don't know how many days I was in the hospital... Then I was all right... They let me out...

And this is your last warning, Miss Moss! You are to stay away from the bank! You are to behave yourself as the good, intelligent citizen you normally are! Your last warning, Miss Moss!...

And all the time Mr. Roth was in that wall... waiting for me to help him... And there was so little time left. A man such as Mr. Roth—powers of concentration—he could and he did perform a miracle—walking thru a wall—but even conserving his strength and breath and—and the way he said—"slowing down the vital life processes"—how long do you think he could live entombed in that wall? I had to get to him!... But when I walked by the bank, hiding in the crowd so that they wouldn't see me, I saw that there was a policeman there—they'd put a policeman there just to keep me out! I had to figure out some way to get in there—tell Mr. Roth to keep alive, that I was working to help him! I had to figure out a way! There was a store across the street—a store selling paints. *That* was the answer!

Something for cleaning? Of course, Madam—how much do you think you'll need? Oh, I suggest a pint—we have it here in bulk... Open it? Of course. See, it's standard cleaning fluid—it's lady—no—that match—look out—don't—it's highly inflammable—don't—fire! Fire! Grab that woman! She set fire to the store! Fire! Fire!

Yes. There was a fire. In a few moments everyone was so busy that I was quite free to go into the bank... In a few seconds my ear was against the wall.

Mr. Roth! Mr. Roth! I'm back! They tried to keep me away from you! But I'm back! Mr. Roth, what should I do! What?

Help me.... Help.... me....

Yes, I will! I will! They won't stop me this time! Something—get something and tear down the wall! Fire axe! Going to help you! Axe! So heavy! *Will* get you out!...*Will* get you out!... Marble's cracking, Mr. Roth! I'll get to you! Get the air to you! No one'll stop me now! Mr. Roth! They don't want to help you but I'm helping you!

Hey, lady! What are you—you again! Give me that axe!

No! you won't stop me! I've got to help Mr. Roth! Give me that axe!

I'll give it to you! In the head! Get away from me, all of you! I'll kill you! Kill you all! I've got to free Mr. Roth! Kill you! Stand back! I won't let you stop me!

I'm locked up now. They locked me up.... You've been my first visitor in weeks. Weeks. Do you know what that means? All these days he's been in that wall holding himself alive with all his will but sooner or later, if he thinks I'm not going to help him, he'll give up hope, and he'll lose his will to live, and suddenly he'll die! Do you hear me, *he'll die!*... I'm begging you, please make them let me go, and come and help me save Mr. Roth! If you don't help me it will always be on your conscience, won't it? At night when you're alone and you can't sleep, you'll open your eyes and you'll see Mr. Roth entombed in that wall—but it won't be Mr. Roth anymore—just the bones of a man—bones and dead flesh—and the worms! And the skull will talk to you and ask you, "Why didn't you help me?"... So I ask you again—please—please—*won't you come to the bank?* ☆



## THE SHOOTING STARR HAS LANDED "ASHIE"

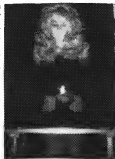
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**"BLESSED  
BE"**

# MAMMA'S BOY

By

Arthur Byron Cover

True, Louie Thompson isn't exceptionally intelligent, but neither is he stupid. Far from it. He may pretend to be slow, just to get along, but he knows what's going on. He knows.

Or so Louie kept telling himself as he began navigating his battered '68 Camaro up the slippery mountain road. The enormity of the deed he had been contemplating for the last week finally struck him—as his car fishtailed coming out of the first wide turn. For a few surreal moments, the machine was utterly weightless, and gravity released him from its grip. And that physical freedom permitted a genie to appear with a puff of smoke on the backstage of his consciousness, where blue bolts of electricity crackling from its fingertips illuminated the dusty props of his identity. Louie's thoughts fanned out in many varied directions, but somehow everything added up, made perfect sense. He just had to look at it the right way.

He knew he would go through with it, no matter what.

Rolling clouds tumbled majestically away from the moonlight and into the darkness; while below, the shadows of bare branches stretched across the fields like gaunt, impossibly crooked arms. The higher he coaxed his heap up the road, the more the landscape of peaks and housing tracts resembled a hibernating behemoth, forever subjugated by the tiny creatures whose headlights scurried across its backbone, or who huddled together, warm and invisible, inside the lumps of its cold, dead skin.

Louie would have happily aroused the behemoth, if it had been possible, unleashing its damned might upon the parasites and their entire planet. As it was, he had to be satisfied with a furtive, but no less emphatic gesture.

If the behemoth slumbered, then the valley beyond, where Louie had been born and raised, was in a coma. This was Burke's Garden, christened after the work of a chain-carrier for an early eighteenth-century survey team, who had planted a garden with potato peelings. The lamest excuse for a name Louie had ever heard of. He easily imagined how it might have stuck, with one frontiersman saying to another, "Nothing's happening here. Let's go to Burke's Garden and watch the taters grow." And his buddy saying, "Great idea, Clem! Let's get hoppin'!"

Legend had it old Burke died a few years later, the result of having picked the wrong batch of mushrooms from the forest. Served the dull-witted bastard right, Louie figured.

Even as Louie rode the brakes down the mountain road, his thoughts receded, and the genie's blue bolts weakened. He suddenly pressed the brakes hard a few times, hoping that if the car fishtailed again, the heightened state of consciousness would return, and his drab reality would again become incredibly vivid.

He switched on the radio, to fill the void with sound.

*I can't keep from cryin' sometimes.  
Well-ah, Momma—she's dead an' gone—  
And Ah-h—I'm all alone.  
I can't keep from cryin'—sometimes!*

Grimacing, Louis hit a button, switching the dial to a musak station, and thought, *I hate rock*. Vicki was a big rock fan; he dreaded the prospect of getting used to it, but since she liked to dance, he knew he would have to.

He drove up and parked behind his stepmother's pickup truck with his headlights off, but the musak playing softly. He let it play after he had switched off the heater and the engine, as he awaited the arrival of the tranquility he believed the musak would induce. He saw right off that it would be a long wait. The mere fact of his return to this plain, two-story farmhouse, to this home where he had lived longer than she, which regardless of what she or the law said would always belong more to him than to her, had whipped his emotions into a maelstrom. His purpose in coming suddenly seemed like the residue of an over-wrought, lingering nightmare—

—a nightmare that had begun as a series of wistful memories, of his stepmother pushing him in the dire swing hanging from a tree that now was just a stump in the front yard; of dreary days spent doing the chores around the house and the barn; of twilights and dawns spent standing before the graves of his father and baby sister in the back yard, wondering aloud where his true Mom was, and if he would ever see her again; of long nights spent doing homework or sullenly watching television in his stepmother's room; of how, as the years passed, his stepmother's love for him had grown unrealistically jealous and possessive; of how she gradually began touching and embracing him at every conceivable opportunity, often with very unmotherly pressures; and of how during his senior year of high school she could contain herself no longer and frequently gazed at him with undisguised longing, overflowing with an emotion he could not begin





to understand until he had gone off to college—and met Vicki, who had explained everything to him. Oh, how she had explained!

The reading light was on upstairs in his stepmother's bedroom. Louis felt a conditioned annoyance that she was still reading to a naked bulb. Hadn't he told her a hundred times that that kind of light was bad for her eyes?

He was about to snicker at the irony of it all when his stepmother's silhouette appeared in the window and shrieked, "Tic? Tic? Is that you?"

"Shhh! It's me! Be quiet or you'll wake the de—the whole neighborhood!"

"What neighborhood?" she asked, leaning out the window for a good look at the nearest house—about a mile and a half away. "There's nobody but us in the whole time zone!"

*Lean out a little farther, Louis thought, and you'll do my work for me.* Nevertheless, he waved frantically at her, urging her to pull back inside. "Wait, Mom, I'll be right up!" He bounded onto the porch, reached toward the door knob...

"Tic, turn on the lights! I've—"

"OW!"

"—rearranged the furniture!"

"I know, Mom!" Louie replied, his teeth grinding, his temples pounding.

His toes a cauldron of pain.

He thought it outrageous that she had taken it upon herself to disrupt the household's order so radically without informing him. Of course, he planned to junk all this crap anyway, but it wasn't like he and his stepmother had been out of touch. She

was always calling him long distance, badgering him to do something about her problems. The least she could have done was to stop bemoaning her fate long enough to warn him.

He moved to sit—and realized in the proverbial nick that the chair he'd been expecting was really on the opposite side of the credenza. His back slammed into the wall, but he managed not to crash on his rump.

No question about it: he had stumbled into the Twilight Zone. And it was *her* fault.

"Tic? Tic?" she said from her room. "You comin' up here or ain't cha? You still there?"

"Give me a second, Mom." Composing himself, he walked up the steps, confidently but with a firm grip on the banister. "I wish you wouldn't call me that."

"Call you what?"

"Never mind."

"What?"

Navigating with relative ease through the old furniture and keepsakes—thanks to the reflection of the reading light from the mirror on the open bedroom door—he wished from the bottom of his heart that her head would cave in. Unaware that he could see her in the mirror, his stepmother fluffed her hair, hid her dentures in a drawer, lit a cigarette, and tried to sit up straight and proper, the way she probably imagined a "real lady" would.

Three generations of Thompsons before Louie had lived and died in this house, but everywhere he saw evidence of an usurper's touch: an antique doubled disassembled and pushed against the wall, to make room for his stepmother's boxes of

books on fringe subjects such as reincarnation and UFOs; the framed pictures of his stepmother as a child, sometimes posing with her kinfolk or the family help, that hung on the walls in place of Thompson momentos: including his grandfather's college diploma—one of Louie's few memories of his father hinged on that piece of paper, the symbol of the father's aspirations for his son; and his father's rocking chair, placed upside down on top of an antique cabinet, sealed by a stack of trunks filled with his stepmother's old clothing. Yes, his stepmother had certainly been busy during the months he had been away to school, but one thing was certain: his own bedroom had been left untouched, a memorial, he presumed, to his adolescence.

"What's keepin' you?" his stepmother demanded, her reflection glaring at him with a hurt expression.

"Patience, Mother; a person can only walk so fast through here."

She held up her hand, commanding him to stop, just as he was walking through the doorway. He leaned against the frame and waited for the emotional ordeal to come, hoping that if she bothered to read his smile, she would mistakenly assume he was glad to see her too. He wanted to run screaming from the house when she, with a mighty groan and hearty heave, rolled off the bed like a great egg. The light hurt his eyes, but he stared fascinated, in what he admitted was a sick way.

Her body had ballooned since he had last seen her, swollen with sudden, additional weight. She looked like a grotesque effigy of herself. Her normally ruddy skin was pale, almost yellowed; her hair was a stringy mop, getting thinner every week, and the shape of her mouth would have been better suited to a lizard's.

It was her blue eyes, sheepish yet icily determined, pathetic yet calculating, that held Louie's attention, for there she revealed her true needs and desires. He had learned long ago that, for her, words were mere tools, whose purpose was obfuscation. Rarely did they augment the terrible clarity that he had always read in those eyes.

Naturally his stepmother did not summon forth the self-restraint—or the decency—to put on her robe before hugging him. She embraced him as if he was a soldier going off to war. Her warmth was practically unimpaired by her translucent, unforgivably revealing blue nightgown.

By now a master of making his rejection appear the result of casual preoccupation with details, he moved away from her to close a window, overlooking the back, that by sheer chance happened to be cracked open.

The floorboards behind him creaked beneath her footsteps; she was moving toward her burning cigarette. "So what brings you to this neck of the woods all sudden like?" she asked; any effort she might have made to conceal her suspicion that this visit was of potential import was in vain.

"Oh, I have this history paper I haven't gotten around to yet. It's due on Tuesday. Thought I'd go to the town library tomorrow." He grunted as he slammed the window shut. "See if they've got anything on the Garden's early days."

"They probably do." She exhaled sensuously. "Those settlers were terrific farmers, I hear. They had a knack for gettin' stuff to come out of the soil."

"Hardly the makings of a memorable paper, Mother, but we'll see." Below, the shoddy wooden cross on his father's grave stood straight and firm; the bar of his sister's, however, needed reattaching. Mother, he thought, wistfully speaking to the person he had never known, *did you really kill her, the way people say, and did you really try to kill me too?*

Floorboards creaked. His stepmother stood beside him, exhaling smoke into his face. "Did you do it? Like we agreed?"

*Like you demanded.* "Don't worry, Mom. I'm not going to see her anymore."

She smiled sweetly. "That's nice. I approve." She nodded blankly, her eyes fixed on a private horizon. "You've yet to learn to be wary of the female of the species. Take my word for it. They're a crafty bunch. You never know what's really on their minds." She raised her eyebrows, grinned lecherously, and looked up and down his body with a cool frankness. "Know what I mean?"

*Yeah. Stay locked in my shell so you can have me all to yourself.*

"Don't give me that look, Tic. There'll be others. You're a handsome, handsome boy. Did you realize you're growing more like your Daddy every day?"

Louie didn't mean to blush; he was surprised that a part of him still responded to her compliments. "Come on, Mom," he said dryly, "you've told me that for years."

His stepmother giggled and slapped him on the shoulder. "Of course I did, but until recently, I was lying."

Louie felt the blood draining from his face. Regardless of how he felt about her, it simply had never occurred to him that she be remotely untrustworthy.

As if burdened by an unfathomable secret, she walked to the credenza with her ashtray and cigarettes. "Remember that nervous twitch you had as a child?"

*How can I forget? You remind me every time you call me Tic.*

"The one you developed after your father was killed by that grizzly, the one they call —"

"Old Hitler," they said in unison.

"Well, people told me you had it because you lacked self-confidence. So I started telling you that you looked just like your daddy so you would feel better about yourself. And sure enough, that twitch eventually went away."

*But you kept calling me Tic, didn't you? Nobody but you ever used that.*

"But I should have known . . . it would one day . . .

be true." She said the last syllables in an awe-struck whisper, like a crush-prone schoolgirl. No doubt about it, this woman had some misfiring synapses in her brain. Her hands shook as she lit another cigarette. She occasionally glanced away from him, as if she feared the accidental portrayal of emotions which, to him, were plainly manifested with her every movement.

*How you must have loved Daddy. It's too bad . . .*

"I'm sorry I had to threaten you, Tic."

*. . . but it's your own fault.*

"But you were so obstinate. I could see how infatuated you were . . ."

*Maybe I'm in love.*

"... and I was afraid you'd do something foolish . . ."

*Like get married?*

"Since you were obviously going to be unreasonable, I had no choice but to be unreasonable too to get your attention."

*You mean you threatened to disinherit me.*

"Tic?"

"Yes, Mom?"

"Look at me."

He did, reluctantly. *Everything's in your name. Nothing's in mine.*

"Do you love me?"

"Must you ask?"

She gave him her patented melancholy smile #4 and said, "That's nice, very nice. You know, I only tried to do what was best for you, Tic."

*What you think's best, you old hag.*

She patted his behind.

*Give you a thrill, huh, bitch?*

"Why don't we go downstairs for a cup of tea? It'll warm you up!"

*You hope.* It was his turn to smile sweetly: ritual #6.

"Sure, Mom. Let's go." Then, at the door, with a slight bow: "After you."

Putting her hand to her mouth and giggling, she hustled out before him.

His mouth twitched nervously as she passed. First time in years. *Amusing.*

Her left-hand fingers danced on the rail between her and the stairwell.

The old wood had never been mended or shored up even once, within Louie's memory.

"I see they've been teaching you some manners at the university," his stepmother said.

*Vicki has.*

"It's about time," she said, giggling to show she didn't mean it.

*Good ones and bad ones.*

It wasn't how he had planned it, there in the narrow hall, but he reached for her anyway.

"Your Daddy started showing me some manners after awhile." She had only begun to giggle yet again when Louie's hands gripped her arms.

*Good—*

"Wha—?"

*—and—*

He threw her—  
*bad!*

*—and she crashed hip-first into the rail.*

It shattered.

For a moment it seemed she might regain her balance after all, that she might somehow prevent herself from falling into the abyss she had routinely tread for over fifteen years.

That she would somehow grab onto nothingness.

For an eternal second, their eyes locked.

*So long—*

Her blue eyes lowered from his view.

*—Mom.*

The world ruptured with dissonance. He could almost see the letters the sounds made.

*It's been swell.*

\* \* \*

*It's over,* Louie thought hopefully as a dangling post swung back and forth above his stepmother's body, its creaking the sole noise in the universe.

Louie was afraid to breathe, afraid the behemoth might hear and know and send its parasites to punish him.

*What if she's still alive?* His throat suddenly parched, the ceiling level see-sawed. *Will I have to finish the job? Or can I just leave her to die in peace?*

Smoke rose from her still-burning cigarette below. It hung in a cloud near the ceiling; stray wisps stung his eyes, forcing him to look away.

Everything was exactly in place. *Nothing's changed,* he thought, disappointed.

In fact, so little had changed that he suddenly visualized his stepmother emerging from the bedroom, a cigarette dangling from her mouth as she demanded Louie to tell her what he had done to the rail.

*But you're dead!* he thought, finally looking below. *At least, I hope you are.*

He sighed with relief. She looked dead. Nobody lying in such a cockeyed position, with a broken post sticking through her thigh and her neck at an impossible angle, could possibly be alive.

As he leaned over for a better view, his hand grazed the tip of the banister. He jerked it away. *What else have I touched?* Quickly he searched his pockets, finding nothing he could use to wipe off his fresh fingerprints.

Stepping lightly, as if he had become a prowler in his own house, he went into the bedroom and picked up a dirty handkerchief from the floor. Other bits of laundry, wrappers, plates, wadded napkins, and piles of spilt ashes were strewn about in what Louie regarded as a staggering display of untidiness. *Poor woman. She was definitely slipping. Maybe I did the right thing, by killing her.*

Yet he could not deny that her spirit remained alive, in this house, and in his memories of it. He wondered if he would ever cleanse this place of her foreign touch.

*Let's see . . . Where should I bury her? How about in the back—where people'll expect.*

Outside, strong winds tore the top layer of the snow-capped fields and whipped strands of flakes across the Garden like handfuls of fairy dust, flung from the sky by an irate angel.

A low moan rose. At first he thought it a sound in the house, but after he saw that his stepmother still wasn't moving, he realized it was the wind howling through the mountains. Imagining himself the only person in the world capable of hearing it, he shivered and watched the bare, gnarled branches of the tree near his father's grave sway like beckoning, skeletal fingers.

The bar on his sister's cross shook and fell off. Swirling snow began covering it.

A great cracking noise reverberated like the fanfare of perdition, echoing, he thought, throughout the valley. A black branch flew across the graves—and crashed into his father's cross!

Breaking in half upon impact, the branch nevertheless uprooted the cross, tearing it from the hard earth in the moment before the entire package slammed still against the ground.

Louie did not know how long he stared wide-eyed at the debris. What was he supposed to do in retaliation for this cosmic insult? Cursing God and His Earth had never given him any satisfaction.

Still, he was seriously considering the indulgence when he suddenly lost his train of thought and, without foreshadowing, vividly imagined his stepmother's grip on his shoulder.

So real did it seem that when he finally summoned the courage to turn around and face the apparition, he doubted his sanity because she *wasn't* there!

Only intense concentration on how terrific and pleased with himself he would feel, after he had escaped without a trace, enabled him to wipe with reasonable thoroughness the rail . . .

. . . and the banister. Wishing to avoid the sight of his stepmother as much as possible, he kept his eyes to the ceiling as he walked backwards down the stairs.

The cigarette smoke continued to hang in the air. Incredibly cohesive, it had taken on a blue hue he found very disturbing, and it shimmered like an aurora in the sky. He was just beginning to think it resembled his interpretation of disembodied thought, or the soul, when his stepmother's dead fingers crunched beneath his boot.

He staggered over her, nearly falling down the stairs himself and breaking his own neck. *What would the people say, he thought when he had nearly righted himself, if they found us both here, deader than . . . ?*

He looked into his stepmother's eyes.

And knew instantly, with a certainty that could be diminished by no application of doubt and reason, that death had transformed them in a manner beyond his experience. Sure, they were dull and blank, just as he had expected them to be, but they were also pitch black. They were supposed to be blue.

That color, however, hung in the curtain of smoke clinging to the ceiling.

Louie almost forgot to wipe the doorknob clean as he ran from the house.

Driving the old two-lane highway to Blackburg—crawling up the spine—Louie Thompson still awaited the quiet thrill of liberation. The snow fell thickly, quickly; the icy road ahead was invariably obscured by a thick, white mist, glittering in the beams of his headlights.

Midway between the Garden and his destination, midway between two small towns along the route, while listening to a rock station so he could be reminded of Vicki and not have to think of the presence he believed still lingered in his house, he noticed in the rearview mirror another car traveling behind him.

Its headlights cast blue beams into the snowfall.

When he drove slowly—advisable procedure, even on the straight stretches—the car slowed proportionately. When he sped up—which the coating of snow and slush on the road prevented him from doing for long—the car matched him.

And during the winding sections, it always lingered behind the last curve, permitting him only glimpses or inklings of its approach.

Finally, as his Camaro struggled through a straight, flat stretch where the snow was especially thick, a road bound on either side by the fields of a small valley, as the beams had just begun to reveal themselves in the distance, it occurred to Louie that all he could see of the car, really, was the headlights. And their hue, after making allowances for intensity, was similar to that of the blue haze above the stairwell.

*What if it's not a car at all?* he thought. *What if . . . ?*

A white rabbit—which may or may not have been tinged with blue—darted from the bushes across the road.

Louie instinctively stepped on his brakes. Hard.

The Camaro spun out of control.

It spun one-hundred-eighty degrees before the left front crashed into a signpost and broke it in two. The headlight popped out.

Then the side of the car slammed into a gully.

The engine stalled in response.

Louie sat frozen, staring where he had just been.

The blue headlights had disappeared.

Somehow he wasn't too surprised. He opened the glove compartment and took out a flashlight. He hesitated. *Am I crazy for even bothering?*

He decided he must be crazy. He got out of the car and searched for rabbit tracks.

He found no indication whatsoever that the creature had even existed.

*Sure is weird, he thought, attempting to sound wryly amused in his mind. The world became hazy, and he sat down on the hood.*

*Christ, I haven't eaten all day. No wonder I'm a disaster area.*

*Have to chance it. Have to hope I won't be noticed, won't be remembered if the police start checking on me later.*

\* \* \*

By the time he'd walked into the roadside diner, Louie was so dizzy that he had to take the nearest available seat; he would have preferred a booth in the back, but he was afraid he would have fainted along the way. *Act natural. Be normal*, he told himself as he noted that he had inadvertently taken the most prominent seat at the counter—the one right next to the cash register. *Pretend nothing's happening and nobody'll notice you. And if they do, they sure won't remember.*

A white sign next to the menu on the board said in red letters, "Although we give prompt service and attention to all, many of our customers are truckers who have tight schedules. Please understand if we take care of them first."

*Wonderful. Move 'em in, move 'em out. He glanced around. Looks like they've all been moved out. Two truckers were eating and talking in the back, and an old man in a gray suit was having a beer in a booth. Two waitresses spoke intently with hushed voices near the coffee machine. Next time I'll pick a night when there's more traffic.*

*Next time? he thought, going pale.*

"What'll it be for ya, hon?" asked the head waitress, a tall, fortyish woman with a black bouffant that, as such things go, lacked nothing in aesthetic appeal, except perhaps a white streak.

"Hi. Uh, I'm not so hungry. How about a cup of coffee?" *My poor stomach.*

"Anything you say, hon," she replied, giving him a frank look with her blue eyes that made him uncomfortable.

*Of course it's coincidence, you nerd. She just craves your bod.* He breathed deeply, drew up his height. "Oh . . . and how about a hamburger too? Everything on it." "Gotcha!" She smiled easily, his mouth twitched, and she walked away.

Louie didn't know whether he should be relieved or disappointed. Funny, he had never before been interested in the prospect of flirting with a waitress—an older woman!—though he preferred to presume many had tried and failed. *I'm no killer*, he thought. *I'm not really like that.* He quickly forgot about the waitress, regretted ordering the hamburger. *I know it. I know it. I know . . .*

He was still repeating the phrase in his mind when, three bites into his meal, a State Police car with two cops inside pulled into the parking lot.

Louie's mind involuntarily replayed the sound of the breaking of the gnarled branch that had struck his father's grave.

In walked his stepmother's corpse, shouting "*J'accuse!*"

*No, it's just my morbid imagination. Must have gotten it from her. Got to get it together. Stay cool, Louie.*

A chill ran up his back. *No, not that. Hah! It's only cold air. Close the door, willya, guys?*

The louder the squishing and crunching of the slush beneath their approaching boots, the lighter Louie's head became. A hand would fall onto his shoulder. Any second now. He anticipated:

A cold hand.

A lifeless hand!

Panic-stricken, Louie swigged his coffee deliberately, to avert his own attention. He belatedly realized, the instant before the drink touched his tongue, that it was scalding hot. *Oh no! The waitress refilled my cup. Gulp!*

Louie's forehead broke out in a hot sweat as he swallowed the deadly brew. And as he suffered, struggling to remain impassive in the eyes of all others, he came to believe that his entire life had been inexorably building up to this one instant, for the sole purpose of testing him.

To see whether or not he would be properly dignified during his arrest for first degree murder.

"Gentlemen," he croaked softly, turning around.

"Well, hiya, boys!" shrieked the head waitress with a big grin. "I haven't seen you two for the longest time."

"Howdy, Mary Jane," said the cop with the beer gut, tossing his hat on the counter.

The younger, leaner one lit a cigarette as he sat down. "Gimme a number two special, will ya?" he asked kindly. "With an extra side of fries."

"And three extras of catsup. I know." Then she shouted "Got that?" through the window to the cook in the kitchen.

Someone Louie couldn't see responded in a quick voice.

"And what can I do for you, honeypie?" chirped the waitress to Beer Gut.

"No, dear, it's what I can do for you."

The three laughed uproariously before Beer Gut finally thought of a real answer and said, "I'll have a steak sandwich, medium raw."

"Just the way I like it!" she said, screwing her thumb into his shoulder.

"And a blistering cup of coffee!"

"Gretchen! Two—no, three coffees!"

"Say, I got a real good story for you, Mary Jane," said Young and Lean.

"You do?" asked the waitress anxiously, putting her elbows on the counter as she unwrapped a stick of gum.

"I wouldn't lie." Young and Lean smiled. "It happened just last July, during that storm that flooded practically the whole state."

"And West Virginia too," said the waitress. "I remember."

So did Louie. His appetite suddenly returned. *Oh boy, A dirty story. Best thing I could do now is listen. Wonder if it'll be any good.*

Probably not, he thought, taking a bite from his hamburger.

\* \* \*

This colored boy from Delaware was driving home to visit his folks in Pulaski, said *Young and Lean*. Not hardly able to see ten feet in front of himself for the rain, he thought he glimpsed someone hitchhiking at the bottom of a mountain road. He pulled off the side, looked in the rearview mirror just as some lightning flashed, and sure enough, there stood a teen-aged girl, looking at him to see if he wanted to give her a ride. He did. She got in, but not quite as quickly as he would have thought, considering the downpour. Naturally she was soaked to the bone. She didn't do anything to dry off, though. She just sat in the front and stared at her hands.

Well, the boy could see right away something was wrong. He found out where she lived and, although it was thirty miles out of his way, offered to take her all the way home. She said it sounded like a good idea to her; she had been trying to get home for a long time. She cried for a little while. Cried over nothing, so far as he could determine. He tried to draw her out, to engage her in a little casual conversation, but she wasn't interested. They drove in silence, except for the times she spent sobbing.

When they got to her house, he pulled into the driveway. She said thanks and got out of the car. Just then lightning erupted all over the place and the thunder got real loud. The colored boy closed his eyes, just for a second, and when he opened them and looked around, she was gone.

Vanished, without a trace.

Well, she's got to be inside, he figured; but he also figured he should find out for sure, to be on the safe side.

He rang the front door bell and this really distraught man, about fifty-five or so, answered. In the living room this woman, the man's wife, started wailing and crying. Just bawling. "Go away," she said, "please, please go away and leave us alone. Please stop bothering us! What have we ever done to you? What?"

"What's the matter?" the boy asked the man. "I don't mean no harm. But you gotta listen to me." And he quickly told the man about the girl.

After he was done telling the man, the man closed the door behind him and came outside. "This girl?" he asked. "Was she about seventeen, with long blonde hair?"

"Yes," the boy said.

"I thought so," said the man. "You see, that's our daughter, you could say. She was killed two years ago, hit by a truck while hitchhiking home. And ever since then, people have been bothering us, claiming they've seen her or picked her up on the road. But she's dead. She's never coming back. She can never find her way back."

\* \* \*

*A ghost! She's become a . . .*

*Could be anywhere!*

Indeed, as the head waitress laughed with joyous malevolence, Louie finally noted a barely perceptible bluish tinge in the color of his hands.

And of his plate.

"It's a true story, too," said Beer Gut.

*Overhead. . . the fluorescents. . .*

"It is not!" the head waitress said.

*They're blue. . .*

"It's pretty effective, wouldn't you say?" Young and Lean asked proudly.

*She's here, watching me!*

"Yeah, I would," said the head waitress, "cept for one thing."

*Or she's not.*

"What's that?" asked Young and Lean, concerned.

*Maybe it's in my mind.*

"I've heard it before!" said the head waitress gleefully. She and Beer Gut laughed heartily.

*So it's one of two things.*

"Very funny," said Young and Lean dryly, through an embarrassed grin.

*Either I'm haunted. . .*

"Yeah, I'm amused," said Beer Gut.

*Or I'm going crazy.*

"So am I," said the head waitress.

*That's all there is to it.* He twitched. He stood and reached for his wallet. "I'm ready to go now, M'am."

\* \* \*

There were no more blue auroras in the sky, no more blue rabbits running across the road, during the remainder of the drive to Blacksburg. *I did this for you, Vicki*, he thought, listening to a rock station at three-quarter's volume. *I did this so we could be together*, he thought as the stormclouds broke apart in the strong winds and the sky cleared magnificently. The moon illuminated the snow-capped fields and the stars twinkled so brightly that he often became momentarily distracted and thought, *No wonder the ancients believed they were the bonfires of the gods*. Then he recalled the touch of her fingernails scratching his body, or her tongue licking the same places, and he thought, *I did this so I could have you, Vicki*.

He nearly missed the turn into the new apartment complexes that had been built to accommodate the university's recent expansion; they were just outside of town, hidden around a bend, but it still struck him as strange that he had almost driven past the goal he had struggled so hard to reach.

*I didn't do it for the house. I did it for love.*

He imagined himself caressing her red hair . . .

*You're mine, Vicki . . .*

Running his tongue over her teeth . . .

*Mine forever . . .*

Nibbling on her pale neck . . .

*Mine to cherish . . .*

Pinching her nipples . . .

*And to obey . . .*

Coming inside her.

*Soon, Louis, soon.*

Staring into her green eyes. How he anticipated spending the rest of his life with someone who had green eyes.

He parked, got out of the Camaro, and deeply inhaled cold air, feeling it invade his lungs with ice-pricks. The heater air, he belatedly realized, had been making him lethargic. His mind had been alert, but his body, until this moment, had yearned for sleep.

Now it yearned for Vicki. *Patience, my dear, you'll be dancing the marital jig soon enough.*

He walked past some frat guys and their dates throwing snowballs in the front. Vaguely aware of a snowball having gone astray and grazing his shoulder, he was too preoccupied even to see if anyone noticed they had struck an innocent bystander.

*We'll be together, Vicki, doing what we should be doing . . .*

He bounded up the concrete steps. Someone across the way was playing their stereo loud. Classical music. He hated it. He knocked on her door.

*. . . Together.*

And when she opened the door he realized, with the sensation of a boulder dropping into a pit inside his stomach, that her hair wasn't quite as red as he had imagined it, that he had never seen it quite so disheveled.

She pushed her glasses into place. "Louie! What's the matter?"

He walked in without awaiting an invitation and closed the door behind him, wanting nothing more than to embrace her immediately, to permit his hands to proceed on their intimate exploration for the tangible secrets of love, which he was certain her body possessed in abundance. *Somewhere.* "I did it. I'm telling you, Vicki, I did it." *Finding the secret . . .* "We can be together . . ." *Will be the fun part.* ". . . without worries . . ."

Her white sweater and tight blue jeans stimulated his imagination, even though he had already seen and touched, many times, what he so feverishly anticipated.

"Did what?" she asked suspiciously.

"What you wanted me to do." Funny. Was her complexion becoming paler?

"What was that?" she asked distantly, stupidly. Then, in an annoyed tone: "Louie, make it quick. I'm studying tonight." She gestured at the biochemistry textbooks scattered on the kitchen table.

"My stepmother's dead."

She covered her mouth. Her eyes went wide.

"I killed her."

"You're serious! You really . . . murdered her!" she exclaimed, backing away.

"Of course, Isn't that what you wanted?" he asked, advancing.

She bumped into an easy chair, then moved around it, maintaining the distance between them.

"I . . . I never meant it . . ."

"But didn't you say it often enough?"

"I know I said it, but it was just an expression. I didn't mean it, I swear."

"But you hated her!"

"Not enough for you to kill her, to kill your own mother . . ."

"She was my *step*mother, damn it!"

"Oh God, you fucking maniac...oh God..." She knelt beside the couch, covered her face with both hands, and wept. "Go away . . . please go away . . . don't bother me . . . why are you bothering me?"

"No! We're in this together. You . . . You're an accomplice."

"I am not . . ." she whispered between sobs. "I never knew you were stupid—actually going to do it. I didn't even know the woman . . ."

"You're my accomplice . . . and you're mine. Do you understand me?" He grabbed her by the hair and jerked her head back, to more easily stare into those eyes, those beautiful green eyes. "And you'll do as I say . . . forever? Understand?"

Petrified with fear, she nodded her assent.

"Good." He released her, took off her glasses, backed away a few steps, and then calmly crossed his arms. "Now take off your clothes."

\* \* \*

They made love on the living room floor. At first Vicki was stiff and resistant. Louie began to wonder if he hadn't made some sort of terrible mistake . . .

But she responded soon enough, responded passionately, with cries louder and more uninhibited than any he, at least, had ever inspired.

And when it was over, he lay on top of her and rested, nuzzling in her hair and around her ear. He moved his pelvis occasionally, half-hoping to become aroused again. Now that he was safely inside her, the horrible trauma of the entire night seemed worthwhile. He began making plans to lie on top of her, there in the living room, for the entire night.

"Ummm, that was nice," she said, scratching his back.

"I thought so too."

"Tic?"

Uttering a brief, shrill cry, like that of a brutalized dog, Louie rose to his elbows and found himself staring into Vicki's blue eyes.

She smiled. "Yeah, that was real nice, Tic. Let's do it again, shall we?" ☆

# Reunion

By RAY BRADBURY

EVERY Monday morning the clugging clamor on the back-porch, the quaking of the house in every old cranny and joint, signified that the ritual of clothes-washing had begun.

The clothes would lie in brilliant mounds, sorted out, ready to be dispatched into the caldron where the metal clunkers went up and down with a *eeee-aww-eeee-aww* noise, and the sound of much thrashing water. Within that electrified machine the surging would be unbelievable, as the clothes swam about, were submerged by merciless attacks of the plungers. They seemed almost alive, floundering their empty sleeves, bobbing their deserted necks and showing, without so much as a blush, their underskirts. The mad bubbling continued until late afternoon. Then the wind snapped a long regiment of materials upon wire lines under the blossoming apple trees.

It was Malcolm Briar's duty to fetch soap chips from the cellar, or gather spilled clothes-pins, and keep his mouth shut, being careful not to raise dust to spoil the wind-flapped linens. Malcolm scuttled about the yard obedient to every shrill order of his Aunt Opie, but secretly rebelling against her ordinances.

So here it was—a particular Monday. Aunt Opie, her mouth chocked with clothes-pins, wiped the lines clean with a rag, and began hanging clothes. But Malcolm, nicknamed Mal, sought refuge in the attic of the large old house on Oak Street; this very same house where his Mom and Dad had lived before their deaths.

He heard Aunt Opie shrilling down in the yard. Her voice was like the pump-handle's creaking sound in the kitchen.

"Mal! Oh, Mal, oh Mal!"

Mal surveyed his kingdom below through a small hole in the dusty attic window. Aunt Opie kept calling, "Mal!"

Mal giggled. She would never find him up here. This was the Robber's Roost. None could enter except those who rapped and softly enunciated "Hing-a-ding-a-rock in my shoe!"

About him were the collected paraphernalia of fifty years of living and dying. All the implements, the unnecessarys, the drills, the nick-nacks collected, shelved and tucked away by aging humans when they no longer served a purpose.

Small tinker-toys of babies now grown into cynics

with their own babies. High chairs gathering dust, offering seating space for fat, lazy old spiders who sat grayly and rarely considered the effort of spinning a regular web.

Neat stacks, leaned against the odorous walls, were pictures of the family: Mom and Pop, Grandma and Grandpa, great-grandparents, cousins, and his brother, David, who had died aged seven.

The great brown trunks with the metal hasps on them. If you blew your breath and wiped the hasps they would gleam like sudden brass stars in the attic night. And if you pulled on the hasps, the trunk mouth gaped open, and the odor of millennial moth-balls would spring outward into your nostrils. With it would come the odor that memory imparts to a room, an odor all its own.

Here, Mal seemed happiest.

DOWNSTAIRS, where Uncle Walter sat, a pallid thin old insect of an invalid, with his feet from day to day in boiling waters and ice waters, it was not fun. Years had stamped Aunt Opie into an irrevocable, stern mold; her whalebone corset tightened in her shape, just as Uncle Walter had tightened in her life.

"Mal!"

Mal listened. He heard the washing machine's ominous thunder still alive down below in the sunlight world, and if you listened closer, the hacking choke of Uncle Walter.

Inserting small hands into the clothes stacked inside one great old trunk, Mal found, first of all, his baby clothes. Clothes that he had once worn himself, before that part of him that was younger, smaller and uneducated, had died. For it was like dying, seeing these clothes—it seemed impossible he could ever have inhabited them. Now he was eleven and could not hope to retrogress backward to those squalling days, and he was amazed that he had survived being so infinitesimal.

Discarding that, Mal next seized upon his brother's clothes. A fine gray little suit, with a gray cap that had fitted snugly upon David's handsome head, he imagined. But now David could not use it. He was captured in wood, like a fly in amber, prisoned deep in Rose Lawn cemetery forevermore. On Memorial Day, Mal would walk upon David's real estate at that cemetery, give him a fistful of flowers and want to hear him laugh or talk.





Next, Dad's old walking cane. Inscriptions on it from some mystical lodge. Next to it an old rubber football nose-guard Dad had worn over his face when he was in college.

"Oh, Dad, Dad, what were you like? Dad, Dad, what were you like?"

Dad was a picture in an oaken frame; a young, handsome man with twinkling eyes and a high, clutching collar.

Mother wore her hair in a soft pompadour and showed her teeth, which were small, feminine—like white kernels of close-set corn.

Just pictures. Clothes, doodads, things collected in an old attic.

Here was a net blouse, yellowed by time, that Mother had worn perhaps to a card party, or to play Mah-Jong, or to see a stage-play of *Hamlet* with John Barrymore, maybe.

"Oh, Mom, Mom! Where are you? What were you like? Mom!"

The tears would roll in soft streaks down his face. And his crying would be mellowed by the very understanding garret, who had seen all things, even tears, shelved and forgotten and gathering dust.

Mal was hungry.

It was lunchtime, and the rollers of Uncle Walter's wheelchair rolled soft rubber through the hall three stories below. Momentarily, the pound of the washing machine was snapped into silence.

Replacing the clothes, stacking the memories neatly back into place, hasping the trunk, wiping his eyes, Mal descended softly downstairs to acknowledge the threats and tongue-lashing that would accompany his lunch.

"Oh, THERE you are, Malcolm!"

AFTER lunch, when Uncle Walter, had retreated to his room to snore away the hot afternoon, Mal helped snatch clothes from the line, toss them into baskets and deposit them before an iron in the kitchen that would hiss if you spit at it.

Aunt Opie would iron all afternoon and he would help. In the early summer evening he would be allowed an hour to play with the neighborhood kids "until it gets dark, then come straight home, and don't go near the river."

Mal sat there.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" snapped Aunt Opie, wiping the supper plates dry at the sink.

"What, Aunt Opie?"

"Go an play," she said, exasperated. "Honestly, you're more trouble than all my money. You're an awful waste of flesh."

"Am I, Aunt Opie?"

"Yes, you are." She moved about in the pantry. "I get so tired of having you under foot."

"I guess I'm not much use," said Mal, staring straight ahead, stricken with that helpless, constricting thought. "Why are people born, anyway, Aunt Opie?"

"To keep undertakers busy. Now go out of the house and play."

"I'm too tired."

"Go up to bed, then."

"I'm too tired to go to bed."

"That's a silly thing to say."

The screen door slammed behind him.

"Don't slam the door, Mal!"

He walked slowly across the porch.

"And don't scuff your shoes that way. Wear out the heels a month ahead of time."

Snap.

The next he knew he was upstairs. He did not remember the instant when the decision had come like the sun falling in his lap. He didn't recall charging through the house on his way up to his room. He found himself now, crying without tears, assembling before himself on his bed all of his worldly possessions.

His marbles, his handkerchiefs, his shirts and overalls, his pencils and books, everything and anything. He put it all in big paper sacks.

THE sun was just going down when he let himself out of his room. In a few moments Aunt Opie would blow her whistle—the silver one with the marble inside that fluttered like a captive bird when blown upon—and call his name.

"Mal!"

"There. She was calling now."

"Mal!"

He climbed rickety stairs in almost total darkness, to let himself into the hot, thick, ancient, but friendly, smell of the attic.

"Mal!"

Aunt Opie's voice was so far away it was a dream. The other world, below, no longer existed. It was put away and dead.

Mal opened the nearest trunk. He buried his clothes in it, deep. Deep down into the years, where all things that will never be used again are buried. Stacked neat, his shirts by his father's and his brother's shirts. His small cap by David's cap. His shoes side by side with mother's shows. His trinkets dumped into the cache of all Time's trinkets.

Then he got out Dad's picture and Mom's picture again.

He carried them to the tiny hole in the dirty window. There was a light-beam so tiny it was almost like web spun from the machinery of a golden spider. That beam picked out one last smile from Mom, one last understanding twinkle of Dad's eyes.

Quite suddenly, the light-beam vanished. There was nothing but a reactive image in the darkness of those eyes, and that smile. They hung in mid-air. They would not go away.

"Mom! Dad, what were you like? Wouldn't you like to see how I turned out?" A long pause. "Huh?" A long pause. "Wouldn'tcha?" A long pause. "Mom." A long pause. "Dad?"

Something shifted in the dark.

"I only want to be up here with you. There's so much of you up here. All the things you were. If I could put them together—maybe—I could make you again. Maybe you'd live again!"

It was true. Deep in these trunks Mal could imagine every sweat droplet ever shed by Dad, every molecule of flesh that had ever slipped from his fingers, a little cell of skin, a little fragment of fingernail. The under-arms of the coats, where the good animal sweat of Dad had been expelled and absorbed and kept in summer and winter. It was all there. The clothing was Dad. Besides that, people are like reptiles shedding skin, but in different ways—in small shards, in microscopic bits. They would be here, too, those little unseceable bits. All in the trunks. Here in the attic. Dad. Here and now! Mom. Here and now! David, too.

Mal trembled violently. From now on he'd stay up here. He'd never go downstairs. He wanted to stay up here, with them. To be one of them, and waste away and waste away into vanishing. Until he was nothing more than a picture stacked against the wall; a bundle of folded clothing, a scatter of childish toys.

This was only the beginning of an adventure. Why, there had been no living yet, at all. That would come as each hour advanced and he groped nearer toward the reality of Mom and Dad and David.

He trembled like a candle-flame in a breeze. He was almost blown out by the violent storm inside himself.

Sorting out all of Mom's things, he examined them. Thread by thread, button by button, caressing and kissing and understanding them. He put her picture amid them. Her jewelry, her beads, her rings, and a few pitiful compacts of dried, musty cosmetic.

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Symbols. Her symbols. And with these symbols, like a young witch or sorcerer, laying them out in designs on the attic floor, and talking to them, and chanting over them in a childish piping, perhaps he could summon back one or all of those loved ones from their deep moist graves!

Three trunks. Like coffins. Each containing the accumulated magic symbols of three people he had never seen except in his brain.

He threw open all three trunks at once.

ALL THREE!

"MAL!"

Early morning. A week later. Maybe a month. Maybe even ten years later. Maybe fifteen years.

"Mal!" Aunt Opie, on the green lawn, shouted and blew the silver whistle. Despairing, she thumped into the house, perhaps to pick up the phone.

If she called the police, well, Mal didn't care. He sat up here and laughed a little while things evolved toward that final phase. Things were working right. He had no fear, nothing but a calm, certain assurance that everything would be all right.

Already he was part of the discarded things. One of those useless objects, as Aunt Opie had labeled him, best thrown in the garret, framework for spiders to build gray tapestry on. He was fitting in already, sinking into the dark, becoming a shadow, becoming like Mom and Dad. Just a picture, just darkness, just clothes, just baubles, just memories. It would take a little time, that was all.

He had not eaten. Hunger was not in him, nor room for hunger. It was simply enough to be up here. His face must by now be filthy black, his clothes in a horrible state, his body in even more of a thinned, neglected condition. Just a little longer.

He watched the hours crawl by like bright animals.

He began to get more and more sensitive to the place. Now, at last, the fulfillment. Dad and Mom and David and he. One large, rollicking family!

From the odors, from the perfumes imbedded in pyramids of clothing, from the pictures, from the furniture they had sat in, from books in yellow piles, now came Dad and Mom and David! To meet him, to meet him, to join hands, to kiss him, to hold him, to laugh with him! Laugh and dance and sing!

"Dad! Mom! I'm so glad to see you! To really see you! I knew if I kept trying, I could do it. It's like magic! Oh, are you really here? Mom, Dad!"

They were there.

Mal felt tears of happiness warm on his face.

And then the darkness was split down the middle by a great knife of fresh daylight.

Mal screamed.

THE door leading upward into the attic was thrown open and coming up the daylight knife was the stern stiff figure of Aunt Opie!

"Mal? Mal, is that you? Mal? Are you up here?!"

Again Mal screamed.

"Mom, Dad, don't go away! Mom, Dad, David!"

Daylight infested the attic. Mal rolled upon the floor in a tangled skein of clothes and baubles. Aunt Opie darted forward.

"Have you been up here for four days? You worried us that long! Mercy God Almighty, Malcolm Briar, look at you. LOOK at you! LOOK AT YOU!"

She grabbed him, twisted him toward the door. Daylight hurt his eyes and he stumbled.

"Walter!" cried Aunt Opie. "Walter, come see where I found him!"

It was insane. The very last of it all. No matter how Mal screamed, babbled, cried out, carried on, or tried to attack Aunt Opie, her mind was made up.

Spring cleaning.

The attic was emptied of all its dark treasure. The baubles were thrown heartlessly into an incinerator. The pictures were sold for their valuable frames.

But impossible of all impossibilities, was the washing-machine churning, churning on the back porch. Inside the washing-machine, all the writhing clothes that had belonged to Mom and Dad and David! Churning, jumping, frothing, shuddering. Dad's shirts. Mom's blouses. David's play-suits!

All of the magic, the memory, the symbolism being washed, churned, beaten, soaked, twisted and laved out by the merciless metal plunges and the acid soap and the slushing water!

All of the precious long ago, the sweet immortal perfumes damned by lysol and water.

All the tiny flakes of living and memory now castrated, cleansed, put asunder and drowned!

And the clothes, as they came, one by one from the machine, hung like empty corpses, no more to live, no more life to them, on the line beneath the blossoming apple trees, swaying in a slow hot wind.

Mal collapsed, twisting in Aunt Opie's hard hands. He screamed and screamed, crying out his heart and his lungs and weakly sobbing into an insane hysteria.

"Mom, Dad, David, don't go away! Don't, oh, don't!"

Sinking into a nauseated darkness, the last sound he heard was the merciless thrashing; plunging, gurgling of the washing-machine, killing, stomping, pounding, *down and around and down...* ☆

# FLECKS OF GOLD

By

Larry Tritten

"There's something wrong over there," Pamela said to her husband. She was standing at the living room window, looking out at the house next door, which stood in a profound silence accented by the onset of twilight. The neighborhood was settling into an early evening suburban languor disturbed only by the distant sound of a power mower, a soft pealing of backyard laughter.

"Where?" said Jim, only half-attentively, his gaze wandering the maze of headlines on the front page of the Chronicle.

"There. Next door," Pamela said, but more to herself than to her husband, who she knew was preoccupied. What was it? she asked herself. This sense of something not quite right. The feeling had grown slowly over the past few days, beginning a few days after the new neighbor moved in, and had finally become a distinctly uncomfortable sensation. But what was its significance? Looking at the house now, Pamela explored the sense of oddness she could not dispel, searching for an explanation. The previous tenants, a middle-aged couple named Bless, had been slightly remote (though not unfriendly), which had been natural enough considering the generational gap between them and Pamela and Jim. Yet they had always been a presence in and about their home: there had been the frequent sounds of tinkering coming from their garage, occasional backyard barbecues, and the coming and going of visitors, friends and family. They had moved to Florida, where Mr. Bless (so he told Jim) had accepted an executive position with a greeting card company, and had left the neighborhood somewhat abruptly. The new tenant came just as abruptly. That had been perhaps a week ago. One morning Pamela had encountered him out front while both of them had stepped outside to pick up morning newspapers, and he had smiled at her and said, "Good morning, yes. I will read my newspaper."

How would she describe him? He was young, approximately her own age, and agreeably good-looking, but there was something oddly mechanical about the way he moved his body; yet his eyes were as alive as a child's and almost as clearly bright as amber gems. She had been watching him for several days now, trying to get a fix on his routine. Every morning he left the house, moving with that curious precision of posture of his, and within an hour or two he would return, carrying packages: grocery bags, gift-wrapped parcels, shopping bags. Was that strange?

Pamela asked herself. It was a rhetorical question, of course. She sighed, peering at the house next door, which was fading into incipient shadow now as the last light of the sun abandoned the sky. From the side window in the front room she could look back into the front window of the house, which was set further back than hers. Suddenly she saw, through partially closed Venetian blinds in the house's front window, an unarguably odd sight. It was a brief, bright flickering, like a sparkling of phosphorescence. Her vision momentarily dazzled, she jerked back from the window, blinking, startled, then looked again, straining to discern something definable. But there was nothing more than a vague impression of the familiar half-shapes of furniture, a mere hint of movement from somewhere far back within the room.

Behind Pamela, Jim stirred, putting his arms around her, and she jumped suddenly, letting out a small cry.

"Hey," Jim said, holding her in a tight embrace that absorbed her shudder, and she melted into the embrace, turning her face into his shoulder.

"Jesus," she said, "Jim..."

"Kiss," he said, and put his lips into her hair, loving her.

Pamela said nothing more to her husband about the neighbor. Yet in bed that night, past midnight, she opened her eyes and lay awake, thinking about the house next door. It seemed, though she could not quite recall, that she had just awakened from a dream that had featured the house. Just beyond the edge of memory an evasive image loomed, but would not take shape. She saw the house:

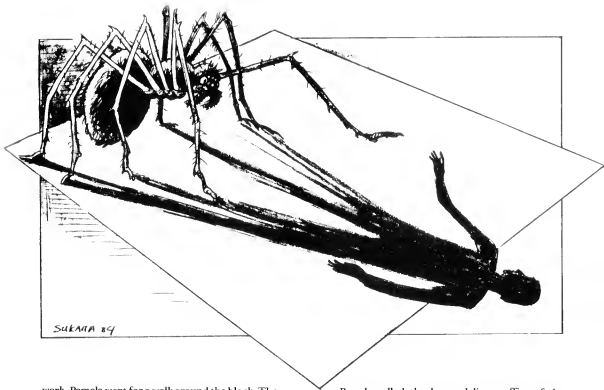
It was a Spanish style cottage, white, with a red-tile roof and a large picture window whose Venetian blinds were never open wide, as if to admit a little light without revealing anything within.

Pamela got out of bed and went into the living room. She drew back the drapes at a side window and looked out at the house. In his back yard she saw her new neighbor, naked, walking about in moonlight. He looked up sharply, toward her, and she stepped quickly back from the window.

When, heartbeats later, she took another furtive peek, he was carrying what looked like a stuffed animal doll to the garbage can by the back fence. She heard the lid of the can clink shut.

She couldn't help noticing how very well-endowed he was, strange gait notwithstanding.

The following morning, after Jim had gone to



work, Pamela went for a walk around the block. The house next door, she saw, was as mute as if it were the home of a recluse: door closed, blinds closed, the facade veritably two-dimensional in its exanimate appearance. She wondered if her neighbor was home, or had he gone shopping already? What if, she thought fancifully, I knocked on the door, invited myself over, a well-meaning neighbor paying a neighborly visit to someone new . . . ?

By the time she had circled the block and stood at the edge of her lawn, Pamela had developed an enterprise for herself. As a relatively new housewife whose time was not yet bound by a demanding schedule of child care or social tasks, she was more or less errant in her pursuit of ways to pass each day, which seemed repetitiously to feature a certain amount of household work or yard work that was superfluous or improvisational. Therefore, she would take the mystery (if such it was) of her neighbor to task, and investigate it with some intent. Let it be her hobby. She had always had a flair for such theatrical approaches to mundane situations, and this was a natural.

One began, Pamela supposed, by drawing conclusions. Mr. Oddness, as she decided to call him, did not seem to have a job (odd!), did not have a car (odd!), and had not yet to her knowledge received a single visitor(!). He was apparently a foreigner of some kind, since he spoke English with peculiar syntax. His name was not on his mailbox. She had seen him in the role of nocturnal nudist, and had no inkling what to make of that. She knew that he subscribed to the *Chronicle*, and it occurred to her that his name would be on record in the *Chronicle*'s subscription department.

Pamela called the home delivery office of the *Chronicle* and spoke to a man in charge of deliveries in her neighborhood. "This is Pamela Warner," she said. "At 1932 Denslow. We're not getting our newspaper. I think the boy is delivering it to our neighbor, at 1936, by mistake. Could you check into it?"

He did, and called back half an hour later. "Well, Mrs. Denslow, we deliver to both addresses," he said, puzzled. "I don't know what—"

"Are you sure?" Pamela cut in. "Who do you have listed at 1936—?"

"Well . . ." There was a silence on the other end of the line. "That's a Mr. Oddness."

It took a moment for meaning to accrue as the sound of the name faded in Pamela's ear. Then, closing her eyes involuntarily, she grimaced slightly, groping against logic for a sensible construct. Mr. Oddness. But she just . . . The thought dwindled, scattered, and even as it did there was an impression of the sound of her name being spoken, whispered, in a tiny voice that seemed to issue from the most remote, subliminal depths of her mind. A voice she had heard before.

"Mrs. Denslow . . ." In counterpoint, this voice spoke from the mouthpiece of the telephone Pamela held in her hand like some formless, inexplicable object, and at which she stared inexplicably.

She hung up.

I must, she told herself as she poured a glass of wine in the kitchen, have heard his name somewhere or seen it somewhere. The other thing, the subliminal summons, she flatly refused to think about.

In a sense, the mystery had become official. From her window, wine glass in hand, Pamela looked across at the house next door. She held her gaze on

the closed blinds, and could not be sure, not entirely certain, that they did not move ever so slightly, a mere whisper of a motion.

In bed that night, hoping to rouse his wife from the strange mood she seemed lost in, Jim invoked the full violent storm of his love for her, overwhelming Pamela with the force of it, and she held to him possessively in the eye of the relentless storm, concentric circles of sensation whirling her further and further down into the deep well of release. Her mind, unhinged from her body, spun free; and her body, free of her mind, evolved into an untroubled sleep.

In the morning, Pamela avoided thinking about the house or bothering to look at it during the hour she spent with Jim before he went to work. She found herself unnerved by the mystery of her neighbor. She made a conscious effort to put the matter out of her mind, in the way that one tries to unfocus attention from an unpleasant but imminent appointment, like a trip to the dentist. Below the level of her immediate attention, however, the inevitable thoughts nagged her. Still determined to ignore them, she vacuumed the house with affected zeal, going under and behind furniture with the hose more intently than ever before. She washed the breakfast dishes, leisurely; made a grocery list more comprehensive than was her habit; then brewed a fresh pot of coffee and settled down against the bean bag pillow on the living room floor with some magazines she had bought days earlier but hadn't looked at yet.

Halfway through a cup of coffee and the latest issue of *People*, she got up and went to the window.

The sky today was gray-black, sullen, an ominous montage of ragged clouds spread across it, the promise of rain strong. In the gray distance Pamela saw a figure coming up the block in her direction. A moment later she recognized Laura Fingler, another housewife who lived at the end of the block and who she knew vaguely from an occasional exchange of small talk in chance encounters in front of her house or Pamela's. Laura had always impressed Pamela as an energetic domestic type, conventionally family-oriented and somewhat plain, her preference running to simple dresses in primary colors, comfortable sling sandals, minimal makeup. Now she was wearing a party dress of a stunning incandescent indigo blue, with deep cleavage, and high velvety black boots with high heels. Her dark blonde hair was down in a lush spill about her shoulders and she was moving step by precisely premeditated step in a kind of robotic lassitude.

Pamela sensed what she was about to see, yet braced herself lightly with fingertips against the window as she watched Laura go up the walk to the house next door, pause no more than a millisecond, and then open the door without ringing the bell and go inside.

It was too much. Really too much.

Pamela shook her head, bit her lower lip, staring. I

will not leave this window, she thought, *until* . . .

The blinds of the house next door, tightly shuttered, would admit no view of whatever extraordinary drama was taking place mere yards from where she stood, her mind dismayed by the possibilities of the situation.

Pamela's vigil lasted fifteen minutes, twenty, then the frustration of her incapacity to grasp the mystery overwhelmed her. She put on a coat and went outside. Past the neighbor's house she moved slowly, pretending to be casual, so casual that she almost missed it. Yet when the dull brightness caught her eye she was amazed that she hadn't seen it at once. The sidewalk in front of the house was ashine with a subdued dazzle of gold like the flecks of silver that gleam in some sidewalks when the slant of light is right. A fine trail of dull flaked gold led down the block to Laura's house.

At that moment a cry, liquid and orgasmic, broke like a sob through Pamela's mind, so palpable and distinct and yet simultaneously so phantasmal she could not be sure whether she had heard it or merely seemed to hear it. Pamela stood directly in front of the house. Which seemed to move, to tilt, to beckon, to waver. The front door loomed monstrously large in front of her. Pamela gasped. Turning, she moved, nearly running, back to her house.

She sat in the living room, trembling, eyes shut, lips pressed together, shaking her head. No. No.

A tiny insistent voice whispered yes, yes.

In the gray midday bathroom, in the opaque half-light before the medicine chest mirror, Pamela shook two pills into her palm, and swallowed them. She stood there looking at her reflection until some firmness of appearance had been restored, then went back to the living room window. How long she stood watching she couldn't guess, but the window was becoming disfigured with the premonitory splotches of raindrops when she saw Laura leave the house. She headed back toward her own house, but after taking a few steps paused and looked over her shoulder.

Pamela stepped swiftly away from the window, not giving her the chance. No. No. Please.

That afternoon, by subtle degrees, Pamela felt herself lapse into a dreamlike state. The familiarity of the house became peculiarly alien and as she moved from room to room it seemed as if she were detached from herself, could see herself in the context of the rooms from afar as an observer.

Supper was an abstract experience in which she participated but was not involved. Jim quickly sensed the difference in her, and asked her what was wrong.

"I have a headache," she told him, as neatly as if the words had been scripted. "Don't feel like talking, Jim . . ."

He gave her a quizzical look. "Well, I've got some work to do . . ."

"Do it. I'll nap."

She could feel the weight of his scrutiny as she

went to the bedroom. In the bedroom she pushed herself against the wall and clung, her damp palms pressed against the cold surface, fingers splayed. The floor seemed to drop away from her feet. A sensation of terror, yet somehow exhilarating in its intensification and exoticism, came over her. She pressed her hips to the wall, wanting to vanish through it and into it, to thrust the clamoring heat of her sex into the dense medium, achieve congress with it. Tears brimmed in her eyes, sweat broke out on her scalp, saliva filled her mouth, her nose ran.

Time passed and she awoke and discovered herself in bed beside her husband. Stealthily as a cat, she moved from the bed and walked through the dark house. She could hear the continuous drumming of rainfall on the roof and the whelming of wind-driven sheets of water against the windows as she passed through the hallway, feeling the chill of the floor on the bottoms of her bare feet until she reached the warmth of the living room carpet. She went to the window. The pavements were soaked with rain that also ran in quick streamlets across them, but still Pamela could see the durable glaze of flecked gold that ran across the front walk from the house next door to the walk of her house.

She opened the front door and went outside. She was drenched before she had gone a few steps, the silken nightgown plastered wetly against the heat of her flesh.

She did not hear the bell ring over the splashing dance of the rain. When the door opened she stepped unhesitantly inside.

"Spider to the fly," he laughed, and motioned to her.

Whatever remained of Pamela's normal consciousness perceived with wonderment the scores of opened boxes and bags that littered every part of the room, the merchandise strewn helter-skelter across the floor—expensive dresses, hats, shoes, lingerie, and designer jeans from a variety of fashionable stores and boutiques. The dim room was a botanical lair of vivid, sensual colors, of silk, nylon, leather, and velvet.

"Yours, sugarsweet," he said. "Us. Now."

In the bedroom doorway they stepped over a dead dog and he picked her up and carried her the final few steps to the bed.

"No!" Laura cried in protest when she saw Pamela. "Selfish, selfish!" She hit him angrily with her fist, but he ignored it and brushed her away with a flailing arm.

The sense of being disembodied was terrific. Pamela's mind went somewhere beyond a far perimeter of perception, yet her nerves seemed to sparkle with a greedy awareness all their own. Her nerves glowed with a lovely terrible sensation that evolved into a pure and absorbing heat that went on and on.

Some time after the end of it, she woke and sat up stiffly.

"Bitch!" Laura snapped at her. "Don't come to me, bitch!"

He lay naked at the foot of the bed as in repose but the slackness of his limbs and the dead eyes and the clenched foetal curl of his posture told her that he was not sleeping.

Pamela, herself again in some operable sense, was not yet herself, nor would be. Yet her mind was clear enough for her to think, with a sudden surge of startling irony: *spider*. He had not meant that she was the fly coming into the spider's web. *She* was the spider, one of two, and they had feasted together on their lover. And now the rite was over.

Or, say, just begun.

"Do you feel better?" Jim asked that night when he got home from work, hanging his coat in the hallway and glancing at Pamela with concern.

"Oh, better, yes, Jim," Pamela said, going to him and holding onto his arm. Her smile was broad and her eyes alight with happiness.

"What?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

"Jim, sugarsweet," Pamela said in a warm whisper, embracing him and turning her face against his upper arm with a smile he would never have been able to understand, "you're going to be a father." ☆





Art: Dave Stevens

A lethargic breeze seemed to push Fletcher from the overcast daylight into the warehouse gloom. Empty crates were piled into corners, and debris littered the cement floor. The entire room smelled of decay and abandonment, as though nothing inside had been touched for years.

Fletcher knew the site had been chosen for his questionable benefit, as if they'd sensed his reluctance to enter such remote and unseemly parts of the city. He grudgingly had to admire their unexpected turn of theatrics. They had shown no such promise six months ago, but the experiment had gotten badly out of hand somewhere along the way, and now the creator found himself in the embarrassing position of being threatened by his own creation.

He thought he heard something and jerked around suddenly, squinting at the doorway. Nothing moved. The sound came again, and he realized it was the wind tugging at a condemned property notice. His nerves were stretched, but Fletcher regarded his fear with a somewhat detached fascination. Walking on the edge was a novel sensation, one which could seldom be had within the safe walls of academia.

Think of it as business-as-usual, he reminded himself. They must not suspect this myopic, docile old man capable of betrayal. It was a fool's errand, but there was nothing to do except blunder on with it until the police could be told of their whereabouts.

A claustrophobic staircase was sunk into the foundation, leading to a concrete bunker under the building. Fletcher followed the steps to a metal door and knocked twice before entering.

The room inside was impossibly dark. "Hello?" he called. They had always shunned the light like a troupe of sinister vampires.

"I'm here," said an androgynous voice. Fletcher recognized it as being Jason's and idly wondered if the others were present.

"No, just me," said the voice with a smirk.

Fletcher blanketed his thoughts with pretended tolerance.

There was a scuffling in the darkness. "So where's the evidence?" Jason asked, his footsteps approaching the older man.

"I couldn't find it," he said quickly. "I don't know where Markus hid it." He steeled himself for a fury he'd seen before.

"Gee, that's too bad." Jason's words held sincere disappointment. Fletcher felt an absurd desire to laugh but didn't.

He fumbled for a cigarette and struck a match. The yellow flame played shadows across the walls and exaggerated Jason's already prominent deformities. Fletcher tried to maintain a polite expression. He had seen Jason and his friends often enough, but he could never get used to the way they looked.

Cranial extrusions, Emmerson had called it, frowning when he had to readjust the stereotaxic apparatus to fit their misshapen skulls. But Emmerson, bless him, was dead. Markus had been more direct in calling them ogres, though he, too, had died. Fletcher took a slow drag off his cigarette and felt in the back of his mind that this was all a ridiculous misadventure.

"You have a rotten attitude, Fletcher," Jason said abruptly. They stood in the blackness, listening to the sound of each other's breathing. "Do you really think you can stop us?" he asked.

"No," Fletcher admitted, regret turning to dread.

Footfalls retreated to the far end of the room. "Let



there be light," Jason said, activating a neon lantern. The chamber was filled with an eerie blue glow.

"Better?" His smile was anything but reassuring.

Fletcher said nothing, as though his answer might betray him. He wanted to run for the stairs.

"Look at me, Fletcher," Jason commanded in a silky voice.

He could feel the hairs rising on his arms. "I'd rather not," he answered, staring at the door.

Jason walked closer. "Look at me," he repeated, louder this time. Fletcher, powerless to resist, shifted his gaze to the other's face. It resembled plaster in the pale half-light. Only the eyes burned with an unnatural intensity.

Strange green eyes, he thought; odd how they seemed to focus somewhere behind the retina instead of in front of it. He looked deeper, trying to find the point of convergence, and realized in sudden panic that he was being sucked into Jason's head.

It was the last place on earth he wanted to be, but he couldn't bring himself to turn away. Fletcher felt his throat constrict, and he swayed unsteadily. The air was becoming unbearably dense. Jason, his lips curved into a demon-smile, moved towards him like a grim reaper. It was then he lost all hope that his life would be spared.

Before he sank into unconsciousness, Fletcher was aware, with a relief that surpassed despair, that the creatures could no longer use him. He closed his eyes and surrendered to silence.

The cigarette rolled from the dead man's hand and came to rest at Jason's feet. He crushed it deliberately, apparently amused that both had met with the same fate.

It was a slow morning, and Alex Gabriel felt trapped inside it. He re-read the last paragraph on the video display terminal with a pang of disappointment, not wanting to start over. It was all so bloody tedious, he thought, the lines around his blue eyes tightening. The vehemence in his reaction surprised him.

His desk was outside the flow of activity in the San Francisco *Globe* office, shoved into an isolated corner like an afterthought following his latest fall from grace. One more demotion, the editor had warned, and Gabriel would be cast into the pit, otherwise known as the Classifieds. He shuddered and tried again to concentrate on the Finance article before him.

A hint of Polo aftershave announced Hank McCallough's arrival. His head popped over the divider like a crazed, red-haired Jack-in-the-box.

"Good Lord, don't tell me you're working!" Hank cried. He darted around behind Alex and caught him zigzagging the cursor across the screen. "Whew! You had me worried for a minute."

"I can't write garbage," he said tiredly.

"I can," Hank beamed. "Call up 'MORGUE'."

The reporter complied, glad for the diversion. "Next?"

Hank hovered over his shoulder. "Type 'CAL DOC DEAD/STROKE'."

An entry appeared in green phosphor light. "'Dr. Karl Fletcher,' Alex read aloud, "noted biophysicologist at the UCLA Medical School, was found dead earlier today." He stopped and looked up. "It's one of your standard obits. So what?"

"Read on," Hank urged.

He continued. "The coroner cited natural causes, although the body had washed up on the beach in a badly decomposed state. Marine organisms had already begun to feast on the rotting flesh—" Alex threw back his head and laughed. "Christ, McCallough, you're really sick!"

"I know," he grinned. "Pity they can't print it."

There was a separate line at the bottom which read, "Query: Do you want previous entires?" Alex hit the return key out of habit and was startled when the next entry came up. It belonged to Donovan Markus.

"I did a feature on him once," he told Hank. "Science beat—something about a machine he'd invented that supposedly increased brain capacity."

"You should have signed up."

"It was discounted," he replied evenly.

"Just as well," McCallough shrugged. "If you had a cup of wisdom, Al, you'd spill it." He smiled, not unkindly, to show that he was joking, but Alex looked as though his peace of mind had been further disturbed.

"Hey, that reminds me!" Hank snapped a finger at the computer screen. "Donovan Markus apparently had a daughter hidden away in Switzerland. She's contesting the will, and there's a probate hearing Friday morning in Los Angeles. It might make a nice little story."

Alex shook his head. "Stonewall would never go for it."

"Rumor has it she's young, beautiful, and soon to be one of the richest women on earth."

"Think it would get me back in Features?" Alex asked hopefully.

"Certainly back to Entertainment," he said, grinning. He waved and flew out of the room as quickly as he had come in.

"Call me if you need any help with the girl," he added loudly from the hallway.

"Not bloody likely!" Alex yelled back, absurdly delighted.

"You think I'm crazy, Gabriel? Letting you out on the streets again?" The editor glared at him from across the room.

Alex looked down in irritation. "All right, so I've made a few mistakes—"

"Like that libel suit when you were doing Features? Or the assault-and-battery charge when I put

you on city beat?"

"She threw the first punch!" he said angrily. "At least I got the story."

"Sure, you write nice prose," the editor agreed, "but you make people mad. Nobody likes an asshole, Gabriel."

He digested the last remark and wished he were elsewhere.

"Do you know anything at all about Donovan Markus?" Stonewall asked.

"I did an article on him, remember?" He managed to look offended, when in truth he couldn't recall a word of it.

"Markus was a very, very controversial man," the editor supplied flatly. "He used to invent outrageous weapons and communications devices and then sell them to the highest bidder on the international market. It didn't win him any great popularity. Then he got into the brain research stuff, which was discredited by the rest of the scientific community. Even his death was surrounded by controversy."

"How so?" Alex asked, thinking about the obituary.

Stonewall laughed without mirth. "You name it, and there was a rumor flying around to fit it. I heard talk of violence, mayhem, enslavement, and weird goings-on up at the ranch. I heard it variously blamed on the CIA, the FBI, the Mafia, any of a dozen foreign governments and espionage agencies, a Black Magic cult, and even on 'astral influences', whatever the hell *that* means. Turns out it was natural causes, pure and simple. There's no story in it, Gabriel."

"But what about his daughter? I could do a 'rich society heiress' angle on her."

"Any skirt downstairs could handle that," Stonewall snorted. "I could handle that, and I'm a 60-year old grandmother, for crissakes!"

Alex blinked in wonderment and realized that she was, indeed, a somewhat frail graying woman. He was more inclined to think of her as the Prince of Darkness at moments like this.

Helen Stonewall leaned back in her chair and studied the young reporter. His face still had a boyish look of early adolescence, with wide-set blue eyes and sandy hair that curled about his ears. But for a man in his mid-thirties, a career checkered with failures gave little hope for a bright future. Maybe it *was* Gabriel's chance to redeem himself, for he really was a very good journalist. She tapped a pencil on the polished teak desk and considered it.

"I'm giving you a break, Alexander," she said at last, "but don't blab it around the office. Tell 'em we had a fight or something and you're going away on extended leave. Just write me an uncomplicated piece about an inheritance, and we'll see what happens. And call me," she insisted. "I want to hear from you every day. Got it?"

His face lit up with a comical, charming smile. "Thanks, Helen. I promise I'll be good."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"Honest!" he laughed, blowing her a kiss in his exuberance as the door slammed shut behind him.

It was Friday morning in Los Angeles. Tall palm trees stood like sentries outside the white courthouse, while inside, where the double-edged sword of justice hung poised, the hearing was already in progress.

Alex slipped noiselessly through the padded doors and took an aisle seat in the spectator gallery. Up front, the reknowned probate attorney Aaron Shelden approached the bench like a walking law library, calling forth legal precedents to abet the preservation of kingdoms. The robed judge sat with one finger pressed absently to his lips, his attention seldom leaving the papers and evidence before him.

Listening to it all with intent concentration was Pandora Markus. She was alone at the counsel table, dressed entirely in black from the wicked points on her stiletto heels to the lace veil that barely obscured her face.

Alex had to wonder if she wore the color out of mourning, or because it looked so good on her. Chestnut hair fell across her shoulders like a shimmering cape, framing an elfin face graced with creamy skin, full red lips, high cheekbones and dark exotic eyes. She looked like a deliberate incarnation of the perfect woman. Alex watched her dreamily, not realizing that he, too, was under observation from another quarter.

What had taken Donovan Markus a lifetime to accumulate changed hands in a matter of moments. Power and empire moved with the swift swing of a gavel. Pandora's face reflected relief, then smugness, as if she'd always known it were hers but had to undergo the formality of a hearing to get it. Aaron Shelden joined her, and they started down the aisle toward the exit.

Before she reached Alex, Pandora stopped abruptly. "Come along, Lonn," she said, her voice low. The next case was being readied in the background. "This has already taken enough of my time."

She was addressing a blond man in the spectator gallery. He had the strong chiseled face of a *Gentleman's Quarterly* model and the build of a defensive end. And from the unmistakable way that he was staring at Alex, he looked like he wanted to kill the quarterback. The reporter pegged him for a bodyguard.

Pandora noticed. Her head snapped around as she followed the blond's gaze and traced it to Alex. For a split second their eyes locked, and she shot him a look as quick and poisonous as a snake's hiss. Then she turned away and brushed out of the courtroom, leaving Alex with a stunned expression.

Christ, what was that all about? he wondered. That woman had a mood like summer thunder. But the warning signs in her eyes made him even more determined, and he tried to envision the interview

he would do with her . . . luxurious surroundings, servants bearing drinks by the pool. His train of thought suddenly derailed when he realized he didn't know where she was staying.

Alex shook his head to break the spell, but by then it was too late. Sheldon's two-toned blue Bentley was pulling into traffic just as he reached his own rented car, and he lost them at the first stoplight.

He slapped his palm against the steering wheel in frustration. That lovely sylph of a girl was turning into one hell of a challenge to masculine supremacy.

"You were wonderfully efficient, as always," Pandora planted a quick kiss on her attorney's cheek as the Bentley rolled to a stop by the curb. "Imagine, having to prove I was a Markus! Any fool could tell by merely looking."

Aaron had to concede the point. Donovan's little girl was clearly the result of his wisdom and genes, with the same serious cast of intelligence on her face and that undefinable aura of mystery which seemed to run in the Markus line. In the four years since he'd last seen her, she had matured into a stunning young woman.

"Why are we here?" she asked, peering through the windshield at the ultramodern Beverly Hills bank. "Isn't this ordeal over yet?"

"Very nearly," Sheldon replied, glancing over his shoulder at the backseat. Lonn was sitting in the corner, politely engrossed in a men's magazine.

"Did you inherit him along with everything else?" he whispered disapprovingly.

"He's a highly paid professional, rather like yourself," she smiled sweetly. "You can both think of it as job security."

Aaron frowned and removed a sealed envelope from his suit pocket.

"This fits a safety deposit box," he told her, shaking a brass key into her hand. "Your father gave it to me less than a week before he died. He said it was an additional part of your legacy."

Pandora held up the small key and regarded it curiously. "What could possibly be in the box, Aaron? I'm so bored with stocks and bonds."

"I'm sure you'll let me know," he answered restarting the engine. "Call me tonight if there's anything too unsettling in the vault, all right?"

"Of course, darling," she purred.

On the sidewalk, Pandora turned to Lonn. "Find a taxi. I'll be out momentarily." She bent over to straighten the seams on her stockings, then squared her shoulders and marched into the bank alone.

The bed at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel was littered with news clippings, phone directories, orange peels and empty soda cans. Alex Gabriel was sprawled in an ungainly heap atop the clutter, waiting for the phone to ring. He jumped a foot when it did.

"Well?" he asked breathlessly.

Hank's voice crackled over the bad connection. "Quite well, thanks, and yourself?"

"Did you find out her middle name?"

"Karis, same as her mother's maiden name. Tell me again why I spent my whole lunch hour in the microfilm lab."

"She didn't register at any hotel under 'Markus,'" Alex repeated. "I hope she's using this other name. How's Stonewall?"

"Oh, the same even disposition—always mean. She was asking if I'd heard from you."

"Keep saying no. I want to get my facts straight first."

He hung up and grabbed one of the phone books. Success came with the fourth call.

"Good afternoon, Chateau Marmont," the woman said pleasantly.

"Hello. Has Pandora Karis checked in yet?"

"There was a lengthy pause. "Yes, I'll connect you."

"No!" he said quickly. "I just wanted to make sure she'd arrived safely. Thank you."

Alex grinned at his reflection in the dresser mirror. Nya ha ha, he thought, twisting an imaginary mustache like a silent film villain.

Two could play her unfathomable game, after all.

From the bank's glass-and-chrome lobby, a security guard escorted Pandora through a locked gate to the vault. He removed a medium-sized deposit box and placed it in a private viewing room, closing the door on his way out.

Pandora stood stiffly for a moment, eyeing the container as if it were a Chinese puzzle. She slowly pulled off her black gloves and held it in her bare hands, feeling its weight.

Not substantial, she thought. She shook it.

Something slid across the bottom and bumped gently against the metal side.

A bundle of old letters? Or perhaps a stack of yellowed photographs of her mother, whom she hardly remembered? Patents and papers from some new invention? She tilted her head quizzically, determined to figure it out.

Pandora pushed all stray thoughts from her mind and closed her eyes. In her hands, the box seemed to become very heavy. An oppressive weight, more psychic than physical, came upon her, filling her with a strange sense of dread.

*I shouldn't open it, she thought, but I want to know . . .*

Her fingers trembled as she tugged at the lid.

*I want to know everything.*

She opened the box and looked inside.

It was a tape recorder.

There was nothing inherently sinister about the small machine; it was something a person might carry on the front seat of a car while driving. It had a miniature cassette with ten minutes of play, enclosed in a scuffed leather case with a tote-strap. But when she picked it up, Pandora was hit with another adrenaline rush of anxiety.

She felt watched.

Her gaze swept the room. There were no TV cam-

eras on the ceiling, no dark shapes lurking in the well-lit corners. The door was still tightly closed behind her. She shook her head, feeling silly, but the uneasy sensation persisted. Her finger pressed the play-button, and she held her breath.

"Hello, Pandora," her father's resonant voice filled the cubicle. There was a note of sadness in her greeting.

"You were meant to hear this only in the event of my death. That being the case, I must assume my suspicions were correct, and everything I've feared has come to pass. I've compiled and hidden certain evidence —"

She stopped the tape.

Weak knees carried her out of the bank to the sidewalk, where Lonn was waiting with a taxi. She rode to the hotel in silence, the recorder safely tucked inside her velvet purse and resting on her lap. Lonn, sitting in the back beside her, stole occasional glances in her direction but did not ask questions.

Neither of them noticed the black Cutlass which had followed them from Beverly Hills to the Sunset Strip.

"Get the '600 out of storage," Pandora's voice wafted into the high-ceilinged lobby of the Chateau Marmont ahead of her clicking footsteps.

Alex, hidden in an armchair behind a newspaper, dropped one corner and watched the bodyguard depart. The girl started toward the front desk as if to check for messages, then changed her mind and disappeared into an open elevator.

The paper fluttered to the carpet as Alex raced up the stairs in pursuit. He emerged on the first floor and saw that the elevator was still in transit. Ducking back into the stairwell, he ran up another flight and found the dial still moving. Out of breath, he staggered into the hallway on the third floor and was rewarded with the sight of an open lift.

The corridor was empty.

He cursed eloquently and skidded around the nearest corner, catching a glimpse of black fabric as it vanished into one of the suites. Alex gave a thankful sigh and collapsed against the wall.

Inside, Pandora closed the curtains and hurriedly slipped out of her dress. With shaking hands, she pulled on a robe and grabbed a pack of Rothman's cigarettes, then sank down on the bed next to the tape recorder. A loud knock at the door interrupted before she could listen to the message.

"Who is it?" she demanded, her heart pounding.

"Room service," a cheerful voice called.

She turned off the lights and opened the door a crack. A young man, well-groomed and not unattractive, stood outside in the hallway.

"What do you want?" she asked in her chilliest voice.

"Remember me? We met at the courthouse this morning. I —"

"No, I don't remember you," she answered.

"Alexander Gabriel," he offered a handshake.

The crack did not widen.

"Are you a reporter?"

Alex blinked. "Uh, actually —"

"You're a reporter," she told him knowingly. "Go blow your horn elsewhere, Gabriel." She started to close the door.

"My, my!" Alex gushed. "Beauty, brains, and charm, as well!"

Pandora hesitated, then eased it open a bit wider. Alex had a clear view of her standing there in a China silk gown the color of nightshade, with a gold scythe embroidered on the left side over her heart. Her eyes met his, and she spoke in a low warning voice.

"If you come near me again, I shall ask my bodyguard to remove you. Good day, Mr. Gabriel." She shut the door in his face.

Alex pounded urgently on the thick wood.

"What?!" she hissed, flinging it open again.

"My lawyer could beat up your lawyer," he said.

She stared in disbelief.

"Bye!" Alex laughed, skipping down the corridor toward the elevator.

He waited almost an hour for her.

His rented Dodge compact was parked on a tree-lined sidewalk, giving him an uninterrupted vista of the Chateau's driveway. Shortly before sunset, a magnificent black Mercedes 600 roared up the hill. Across the back, filigreed in fine gold, was the Egyptian symbol of the winged sun; two large painted cobras with golden eyes stared out from the side-panels behind the darkened windows. Lonn emerged from the driver's side and went into the lobby, then came out a moment later to stand beside the car.

Pandora Markus, looking as self-possessed as ever, strode out to meet him. Lonn's face remained impassive as he opened the passenger door for her, but Alex could not hold back a gasp. He had assumed she would change into something more comfortable, but he did not expect it to border on unlawful. Spike-heeled boots rose to her ankles and left a long expanse of bare leg, topped with an abbreviated pair of black shorts slashed high over each hip. A tight-fitting gray sweater added further credence to her figure. Alex doubted the effect was to impress anyone, especially Lonn, so she apparently dressed that way to please herself.

The Mercedes left Hollywood, turning north on the Foothill Freeway toward one of the smaller cities that fringed Los Angeles. Alex kept one eye on the road map as he drove, tracing their route through the sleepy town of La Cañada and then east along the base of the Angeles Crest mountains. As the traffic thinned, he slowed his pace and deliberately lagged behind.

The turn-off came suddenly. It was a washed out dirt road, all but hidden behind a stand of gnarled oaks. A thin cloud of dust was still settling in the twilight air. Alex gave them a few additional minutes,

then followed cautiously. A weathered sign beside the highway announced The Lost Beagle Ranch.

The road snaked through several miles of low scrub-brush hills that afforded no visibility beyond the next bend. When Alex caught sight of a dilapidated Victorian tower jutting into the sky, he parked his car and went ahead on foot. The black mercedes met his eyes first, resting before a two-story farmhouse that dated from the turn of the century. It looked as though it had not been painted or repaired since it was new.

A yellow porch-light gave off a dim glow. Alex tiptoed up to the front door and was surprised to find it ajar. He entered, listening for voices, but there were none. Puzzled, he began a methodical search of each room.

Gradually the reporter pieced together the picture that Donovan Markos had lived here. Clothes were still hung in the closets, and books were stacked haphazardly along shelves in the study. He was convinced he had seen every room in the house, yet Pandora and her bodyguard had vanished without a trace. The idea dawned on him to seek a trapdoor to the cellar, and he returned to the ground floor to start over.

In the basement, Pandora watched Lonn guardedly from the corner of her eye as she pretended to examine her father's desk. The man seemed loyal enough, having worked many years for Donovan as his chauffeur and general strongarm, but she trusted no one since hearing the full message. All indications were that her father had been murdered for some vital information he possessed, and she meant to find it. The tape had given her a clue where to look.

"Wait here," Pandora ordered, tapping the desk. "I'm going into the lab. You know about the spiders?"

He nodded. Donovan had installed an elaborate security system downstairs, and he had no intention of setting it off. He picked up a dog-eared magazine and seated himself comfortably in the old-fashioned leather chair, prepared to wait all night if necessary.

Satisfied, Pandora left the small office and headed down a dark corridor to a door well-remembered from her childhood. It was a portal of mystery and strange magic. On the other side were bizarre inventions which she had watched her father build, sitting at his feet as he had patiently explained their workings to her. He was a modern-day Tesla, equally misunderstood and unappreciated by the world at large, and she regretted his passing.

Her fingers brushed the wall and found a speaker grid with a push-button beneath it. She leaned close, whispering her name and a few nonsensical words to establish a voice-print, then crossed the threshold into the laboratory.

It had all the ambience of a dungeon. Scattered lightbulbs did little to dispel the pervading atmosphere of gloom and instead cast ominous shadows

on the brickwork. Abandoned machines gleamed under a dull patina of dust. She ignored the sights and walked to the center of the large room. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she concentrated.

*I can't tell you where I've hidden it, Pandora, in case this tape should fall into the wrong hands, but I'll give you a hint. When you go to the lab, ask Igor for the evidence.*

"Igor," she said aloud, frowning. There was no Igor.

She tried again, displacing herself in time to the years she had spent there as a young child. A dialogue began to form in her mind, and she could hear her father's voice as he spoke to her five-year-old self.

*Pandora, darling, did you take daddy's notepad?*

*I drew pictures, she grinned, brandishing a crayon.*

*Yes, but I need to see the formula I wrote on it. Tell me where you hid it.*

*Ee-gor has it, daddy.*

*Very fanciful, sweetheart. Who's Igor?*

Egor, she lisped pointing to one of the machines.

Pandora's eyes flew open. Her gaze darted about the lab and landed on a tarp-covered mass near one wall. She ran to it, pulling off the fabric to stare at the electroencephalograph. An EEG machine.

She unlatched the cabinet and removed the paper drum, hearing something move inside the hollow metal cylinder. A roll of notes slid out, measurements done in her father's cramped, meticulous handwriting. Moving over to his old workbench, she pressed the pages flat and scanned them quickly.

Under the heading of Cranial Capacity was a series of numbers for five subjects whose names were not given. She absorbed the data, trying to visualize what the figures meant. It took a while for the full significance to sink in.

"My God, they're monsters!" she breathed.

The alarms exploded around her.

Pandora yanked open the top drawer and reached inside, feeling the cold handgrip of her father's modified Walther. Gun raised, she stole quietly into the corridor. Something had invaded the basement, and she would kill it if necessary.

She found Alex backed into a corner, held at bay by a black widow spider the size of a Saint Bernard. He moaned in terror, his eyes flickering between the barrel of her silencer and the spider's ugly fangs.

"Call it off!" he screamed.

"Why?" she asked simply, folding her arms. She favored him with a bemused smile.

The spider ambled forward.

"Does it bite?" he asked, horribly fascinated.

"Its jaws are laced with a paralyzing neurotoxin," she said conversationally. "It would put you out for a while."

Lonn came running in from the office. The spider noticed him and paused, lifting its mechanical legs delicately as if debating which intruder to attack. Pandora gave a low sigh of disgust and spoke sharply to the robot.

"That's all. Go away." It obeyed her voice-command and retreated down the hall. She opened a panel and reset the alarm, ending the raucous clamor.

Pandora turned on him, obviously angry. "Who are you working for, Gabriel?"

"The *Globe*," he answered honestly.

"Who else?"

"No one," he spread his hands helplessly. "I need to write a good story about you. Couldn't you find it in your heart to cooperate?"

She gave it some thought. "Lonn," Pandora said slowly, "perhaps Mr. Gabriel would like to inspect my father's cabin up at June Lake. I think you two should take a long drive to the Sierras—in *his* car—and let me get back to work, hmmm?" She gave Alex an evil grin.

The blond bodyguard took a firm grip on the reporter's arm and marched him up the stairs. Alex looked back over his shoulder at the girl and knew that no protest would move her.

"You don't have a heart," he said instead.

She eyed him coldly and snapped the lock on the basement door after they had gone. Returning to the lab, she again spread the documents out on the workbench, trying to unravel their mystery. Something inhuman had killed her father, making her an awkward target in the whole weird scheme. She had to find out more about them before they found her.

At 10:10 that night, Pandora looked up suddenly from the pencilled notes. Something was about to happen . . . she could feel her flesh crawl.

The alarms went off a second time. ☆

To Be Continued . . .

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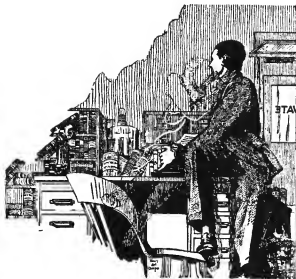
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# BOOK REVIEWS

By

Michael P. Hodel



## THE BUSINESSMAN: A Tale of Terror

by Thomas M. Disch, Harper & Row, \$14.50  
(hardcover)

It happened at a west coast science fiction convention a few years ago, during a panel on writing. A panelist was orating on how characters must be vital, how they must grab the reader immediately ... above all, how they must *live!*

At which point, someone in the audience stood up and quoted, "Marley was dead, to begin with."

Which brings us to **THE BUSINESSMAN**, by Thomas M. Disch. And Giselle Glandier who is most assuredly not alive. She has been murdered by her husband, Bob. And that's just the beginning of her problems. And his. And those of assorted other characters, alive, dead and in between.

If Nabokov had collaborated with Thorne Smith, this book might have been the result. It is comic, it is terrifying and it is delightful. It is an antidote for all those terrible horrifying books that clutter the stands, attempting to drain the blood from your veins, the color from your face and the money from your pocket. Do not misunderstand me here. This is not a parody of a horror novel, it is a fully realized, original creation of one of the finest writers in the medium of fantasy, and its virtues do not depend on the reader having digested job lots of horror novels. It is that Disch has taken the forms, the conventions of the overworked and ill-used genre and has stood them on their heads, using the banalities to create a gruesome gestalt. And yet, the terror in this tale is not that of a splatter movie, but of a more intellectual — and thus more chilling — kind.

You may have noticed that I have given you a paucity of plot. That is because you don't describe a good soup, you taste it. So I'll not rave about the potatoes in this broth, nor explain how the chef slipped in an onion, some garlic and a twist of whatever. No, I shall merely urge that you taste this Disch for yourself.

## THE GHOST LIGHT

By Fritz Leiber, Berkley Science Fiction, \$7.95  
(trade paperback) A Byron Preiss Visual  
Publications, Inc. Book

Leiber, the master fantasist, also deals with ghosts. This book has a new novella (the title story) plus some of Leiber's better known short stories and a chunk of autobiography. And the book has some extremely well-done interior illustrations by known and lesser known artists.

The title story is the first new Leiber piece in some time. It is quiet, elegantly told ... and somehow unsatisfying. That is not a word that one wishes to apply to the man who wrote **THE PALE BROWN THING**, or **CONJURE WIFE** or the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser tales, but for this reviewer, at least, it is the word that fits. Now, a new Leiber is an Occasion, and I like his prose in the same way that I admire good precision work of most kinds, so I am loath to criticise it. But, put alongside "Gonna Roll the Bones", or "Spacetime for Springers", or "Midnight by the Morphy Watch", — all of which are in this collection — "The Ghost Light", good as it is, somehow lacks something.

But if you value Fritz Leiber, you should own this collection. Not merely because it is a sampler of one of the finest writers in the field, not only because the interior art is superb, but because it is an instance of a publisher taking care to provide a well-designed package of work, where both words and art combine to give you a picture of one of the true artists working in the field of fantasy.

And the autobiographical piece, titled "Not Much Disorder and Not So Early Sex", is worth the price of admission by itself. Leiber has been writing chapters of his autobiography in *Fantasy Newsletter*, but this ties much of his life together and gives the reader a perceptive look at the author.

Byron Preiss is to be congratulated for the design and execution of this book as much as Fritz Leiber is to be thanked for writing it. And the artists, Pat Ortega, David Wiesner and the rest, have captured the mood of the Leiber stories very well. Put this one in your permanent collection.

#### NATIVE TONGUE

by Suzette Haden Elgin, DAW Books, \$3.50 (paperback)

This is a war story. But there are no battles in the cold dark of space, no heroic warriors standing off alien hordes. It is a war between men and women, fought on the battleground of relationships. There are heroes and villains, and some of the most vicious in-fighting I've ever read. For a picture of male chauvinism at its worst—utterly remorselessly logical and paternalistic—read a woman. In its way, this is more telling than Joanna Russ' *THE FEMALE MAN*, because it posits a possible situation and follows the threads of that situation to their inevitable conclusion.

It is built around the science of linguistics, and Elgin's background in that esoteric study makes her prose detailed and comprehensible. It takes place after the repeal of the Nineteenth Amendment. Women have lost their rights, and in the clans that study linguistics and act as interpreters to the aliens, the women are chattels. But they find a way to fight back, and...

This is not shrill screed about feminism. It is a carefully calculated and crafted warning. And the plausibility is frighteningly close. This is a book that is going to get talked about, I suspect, and that's a good thing. The story is first-rate and the characters multi-dimensional. The new approaches to the age-old war are original and the results not impossible.

I think males who read this will be a little upset by Elgin's picture and women will want to know more. After you finish the book, go back and read the Editor's note that appears under the copyright notice. That notice should have been placed on the last page, not the first.

If you consider yourself anything other than an MCP, this book will disturb you. If you are an MCP, you won't read this. But you should.

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# Garden at Lu

BY GERALD CHAN SIEG

CINNAMON petals drop upon the air.

The night is still.

There is no sound but footsteps of the wind  
Walking softly on a far off hill.

*(How dim the night and still.)*

All is the same: the ivy cool and dark

Against the moon-washed wall,

The little bamboo bridge, the sycamore

With branches lifted lonely, pale and tall.

*(How lonely, pale and tall.)*



Upon the pool the lily leaves encircle

A flower newly blown.

The long reeds watch the watered stars.

A golden fin goes gleaming and is gone.

*(How quickly it is gone.)*

All is the same. But you and I are changed.

We who knew light

And sunny laughter in this garden place

Are shadows moving in a shadowy night.

*(How dim and long the night.)*

Give me your hand. O let us softly move,

O softly move and slow,

Two shadows out of time who pause a while

To look on what we cherished long ago.

*(How many aeons ago.)*

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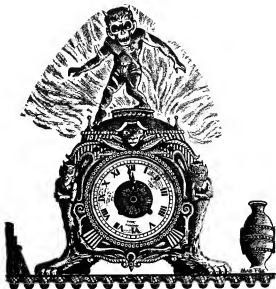
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